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*THE STAR*  
IN THE WINDOW

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OLIVE HIGGINS PROUTY



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# THE STAR IN THE WINDOW



# THE STAR IN THE WINDOW

*A NOVEL*

BY  
OLIVE HIGGINS PROUTY

AUTHOR OF  
"BOBBIE, GENERAL MANAGER," "THE FIFTH WHEEL," ETC.



NEW YORK  
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**TO  
L. P.**



# THE STAR IN THE WINDOW

## CHAPTER I

CHESTNUT STREET led off Main at right angles. It shot up over a hill straight and uncompromisingly; and down again on the other side. At the crest of the hill the Jerome house stood—a huge, plain, square affair painted battleship gray, and approached by three formidable flights of granite steps. A dozen pointed blue spruces had been set out on the sloping ground in front of the house, at measured intervals, like so many birthday candles on a cake—a cake with a smooth white frosting, for it was winter now, and a nicely finished edge, for the Jerome place was bordered by a three-foot granite curb. On either side of the first flight of steps, there were rectangular pillars—miniature Bunker Hill monuments, pointed at the top, with the number eighty-nine painted on the face of each of them, in big white figures on a black ground.

From the street there wasn't a tree to be seen at 89 Chestnut Street, except the spruces—nor a shrub, nor a bush, nor a vine, nor a trellis *for* a vine. It was a scrupulous, bare-looking place. It suggested government property—something military and rigid. Pyramids of cannon-balls wouldn't have looked out of place on the Jerome lawn. In the summertime there ap-



peared on each side of the granite approach, a large round flower-bed of red-leaved canna, such as cemeteries delight in, always neat and well groomed, edged by salvia. David Jerome, and David's father before him, liked flowers well enough, they said, but they liked them in their proper places, like children and dogs.

On this cold January afternoon, when the spruces, as early as four o'clock, were casting long slim triangular shadows on the white expanse about them, Rebecca Jerome sat by a western window inside the big, bare cube of forbidding gray architecture at the top of Chestnut Street, and sewed—in a desultory fashion. It had snowed a little the night before, and she glanced up every now and then to watch the sprinkling of dry powder on top of the crust outside whirl into tiny hurricanes—pink as the sun got lower—scud across the slippery surface and disappear in a cloud over the edge of the snow-covered curb.

This was January third. This was her birthday. She was twenty-five years old to-day. She sighed every now and then.

"Good gracious, Reba," Aunt Augusta had flung at her, from the sewing-machine, five minutes ago, "are you taking breathing exercises for your lungs, or what, I'd like to know?"

Reba made no reply to her aunt's inquiry. It wasn't necessary. She simply sighed more quietly.

They called her Reba for short, pronouncing the first syllable with a long "e"—never Becky. "I don't like names ending in 'ie' and 'y,'" Aunt Augusta had announced before Rebecca was old enough to have any voice in the matter. "They sound sentimental. Soft!"



she scorned. "The child is named after her aunt, Rebecca Marsh, and you can't imagine Aunt Reba being 'Becky'd' by anybody, can you?"

Certainly Reba Jerome, gazing at the tintype of her namesake, inclosed in the little black coffin-like case, which was kept in the parlor-table drawer, couldn't imagine "Becky'ing" her.

"A strong character, was your great-aunt Reba!" Aunt Augusta often reminded her.

She looked strong. She had a big firm mouth drawn down at the corners. She was like a man—an old man of sixty or seventy—in the picture, with a thick neck, and huge hands, folded masterfully across her abdomen.

As Rebecca sat and stifled her sighs this afternoon, she welcomed the occasional whirr of the sewing-machine, before which Aunt Augusta was seated, vigorously stitching now and then. It prevented the possibility of speech. It wrapped her away alone with her contemplations.

She was twenty-five years old! She had turned another corner! Every fifth year there was a corner. Thirty would be upon her soon, then thirty-five, and forty. She wouldn't have minded growing old if the corners brought anything new, but they didn't. Nothing changed. Nothing happened. Five years ago she had sat in the same little rocking-chair, by the same western window, and helped finish a new dress for herself, her invalid mother in the same wheel-chair nearby, her aunts—her mother's older sisters—in the very places they occupied to-day: Aunt Augusta, grim and erect, before the sewing-machine, seated on its wooden cover; Aunt Emma, round-backed and egg-



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shaped, close beside the other window, curved over her work like a squirrel with a nut. She had thought much the same bitter thoughts too. For at twenty she had begun to suspect that her girlhood had somehow evaded her, overtaken her and quietly slipped by while she had been watching for it.

As she sat and sewed this afternoon she kept her face steadfastly turned away from the familiar details of the room behind her. It was an ugly room. It was the back-parlor made over into a bedroom for her mother, who couldn't go over the stairs. It was square and high-studded, heavily corniced in dark brown plaster, and in the center of the ceiling there was a rosette, round and ornate, which suggested the summer cannabeds. From it hung a heavy glass chandelier, with six bronze arms, holding up six white frosted globes. In one corner of the room stood the bed—black walnut, solid and substantial, its pillows covered with hand-crocheted shams, red-initialed in the center. Over the bed, suspended from the ceiling and fastened to the floor, appeared an awkward contrivance made of wheels and pulleys and ropes, a sort of derrick for moving the invalid.

The invalid was a yellow and shrunken little creature. Rheumatism had been slowly bending and twisting her for a quarter of a century now. The joints of her fingers curved backwards, and shone as if they had been oiled, where the skin was stretched. But she could still manage a needle. She held it deftly between her thumb and the knuckle of her forefinger.

It was she who next broke the silence of the room. Fifteen long minutes had been ticked off by the onyx clock on the black marble mantel since Aunt Augusta

had spoken. The whirr of her machine had long since ceased. She was basting now.

"I'm sure I'm sorry to trouble anybody," plaintively the invalid began—she had a high-pitched, querulous voice—"but it's long past four."

"I'll go in a minute," said Reba. "I'm nearly at the end of this seam."

She took half a dozen more stitches.

"I don't know what good it does," complainingly the invalid went on, "to buy expensive medicine and then let it stand in the bottle."

Reba fastened her thread nicely, taking three precise little stitches in the same spot, and cutting off her thread close to the cloth with a pair of small scissors. She stuck her needle into a little red-woolen, tomato-shaped pin-cushion on the window-sill, and began folding up her work.

"I can always be put off," pursued her mother petulantly. "Seams are more important than I am, of course!" And still unsuccessful at getting any sympathetic response, she finished tearfully, "It will be a good thing when I'm out of the way, and not bothering anybody any more, I guess."

Even at that Reba made no reply. Her mother had used the same weapon so often before that it had long since lost its sharp edge. She laid aside her work and stood up.

Abruptly from her place in front of the machine Aunt Augusta spoke.

"While you're about it," she commented in a flat tone, "you can see to the furnace too."

"And open the draughts in the stove, as you go through," tucked in Aunt Emma from the window,



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speaking through the only corner of her mouth free from pins.

"All right," Reba replied listlessly, and went out of the room.

It was always like this—week after week, year after year. It never changed—never, never, *never!* It never would! Reba knew her way blindfolded down the dim cellar stairs to the coal-bin. In the winter every afternoon at dusk the furnace had to have its shovelful or two of coal. All the year around, every afternoon at four her mother had to have her spoonful of patent medicine in a quarter of a glass of water. Every afternoon, too, an hour before supper-time, the draughts of the kitchen stove had to be opened, its lids slipped back into place, and the tea-kettle moved over the coals. Reba went through the motions of these tasks as unconsciously as she walked. She had been performing them all her life. The sisters kept no "help." They preferred to do their own work to cleaning up after some slovenly hired-girl, they said. For the same reason they made all their own clothes. Dressmakers were careless and slipshod; their seams were never properly finished.

Reba sighed again, as she stood in the orderly kitchen before the soapstone sink, wiped dry and spotless, and measured off the usual dessert-spoonful of peppermint-smelling mixture from one of the big brown bottles, empty dozens of which filled a closet down-cellar. When she returned to the bedroom she placed the glass on the table beside her mother, making no comment and receiving none. Crossing the room to her low chair by the window, she sat down, letting her hands lie quietly in her lap with their palms



upturned, and stared out at the lemon-colored sky, pinkening now a little around the edges, with a flickering star embedded just above where the glow was brightest.

Upturned palms irritated Aunt Augusta.

"For the land's sake, what is there to see out that window, anyhow?" she demanded, after enduring them for five minutes in silence.

"Nothing," Reba replied, which was true enough. The town lay on the other side of the house. From this window there were only rolling white fields, crossed and recrossed by uncertain stone-walls that lost themselves, now and then, in the drifted snow; and on the crest of the next hill, one of those solitary New England farms—a small, white house and a big, gaunt, unpainted barn behind—which does so much to make the country look bleak and dreary.

"Nothing! Humph!" sniffed Aunt Augusta, and fell to stitching at a terrific speed, so fast indeed that the machine purred as if it had a dozen cylinders inside to make it go instead of two wide, flat-footed feet placed squarely on a corrugated iron pedal. "My goodness!" she ejaculated sharply, bringing the machine to a sudden stop. "I should think you had a beau, by the way you moon." She glanced at Reba, over her steel-bowed spectacles.

The younger woman made no reply. To have denied the existence of a lover would be lacking in humor. But she might have said *something*. Her persistent silences were a source of annoyance to Aunt Augusta.

"When *we* were twenty-five," her aunt went on, "things were rather different, I can tell you that.

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Why, your Aunt Emma had been a widow for two years when *she* was twenty-five."

"Yes, and your Aunt Augusta," reciprocated Aunt Emma from the window, speaking thickly through her pins, "had lost her young man in the war, and was wearing black for him before *she* was twenty."

"And I," chimed in the invalid in her high whine (she, too, felt the same grievance), "had been engaged to your father six whole years when I was your age."

Reba was familiar with all these facts. Every birthday her mother and her aunts aired them for her benefit. She ought to have been callous to them by this time. But she wasn't—not quite.

"I don't see," she replied in a hopeless voice, "where you think anybody's to come from—in a place like this." She was gazing at the barren hills.

"Where were any young men to come from in *our* day?" scoffed Aunt Augusta.

"But you never used to let me go to any of the Church Sociables, or Christian Endeavor Society meetings, you know," Reba gently reminded her tormentor.

"Well, I declare!" exclaimed Aunt Augusta. "A girl with *your* advantages talking like that! A girl who's had two weeks for I don't know how many Augusts ever since she was eighteen years old, at summer resorts on the New Hampshire and Massachusetts coast, talking about Church Sociables! I tell you what, young lady, in our day there was no such thing as a grand-piano in the parlor, nor piano-lessons either." Aunt Augusta was trimming her seam now with a long pair of steel shears. "Nor diamond



bracelets, that I can recall!" she went on, making her scissors snap at the end of each phrase, "nor gold watches and chains, nor black and white silk dresses, such as *this*! No, sir! Not in our day!" The scissors clattered as she tossed them in the basket on the floor.

"Nor furnace heat," took up Aunt Emma in a less severe tone but still in the same strain. "Dear me! I remember I had to have my callers in the kitchen sometimes, winter nights! It didn't seem to keep them away, though."

Reba wished she hadn't spoken at all now. Would she never learn that silence, just clear, unadulterated silence, was the only way to get along with these women? They were always agreed. No one of them was ever known to take her side against the other two. It was no use to argue. She burrowed down deep into her own thoughts, and stayed there, very quiet, fearful if she made a sound that they would probe her again.

They left her alone for a while—ten minutes, perhaps. Then, "I'll be ready for those sleeves as soon as they're basted," Aunt Augusta remarked, glancing toward Reba.

"I don't believe I'll sew any more," said Reba. "My head aches a little."

"Head aches! Well, I should think it would, staring out of the window the way you do. It's time to light up anyhow."

At that suggestion Reba rose. There was a gas drop-light with a green glass shade on the center table. Silently she went about the business of lighting it, afterwards rolling her mother's chair close up beside it, and helping her aunts move their tools and

materials from the windows into the circle of artificial light. She then began pulling down the window-shades. She wished Aunt Augusta would leave the shades up till it was really dark. "But we don't want the whole neighborhood gaping in on us!" her aunt would be sure to retort, if she suggested it.

It was when she was pulling down the last shade, shutting out the last bit of glorious pink glow, that she remarked, "I guess I'll go outdoors for a little while."

"Outdoors!" Aunt Augusta repeated. "At this time of day! You ought to have thought of that when the sun was high, it seems to me."

"There wasn't a sunset then. It's so pretty out now."

"Pretty! It won't be very pretty for that throat of yours."

"Perhaps the air will do me good," Reba replied. She went toward the closet where she kept her hat and coat. "I won't stay long."

Aunt Augusta turned her head back over her shoulder, and spoke to the girl's mother.

"Eunice," she demanded, "are you going to allow that girl to go out at this time of day?"

"No, no. Of course I'm not," the invalid whined. "No, Reba, no. You're not to go. You might get tonsilitis again."

Reba stood uncertainly by the closet door.

"I've been in all day," she suggested. "I won't stay long." She put her hand on the knob of the closet door.

"Didn't you hear what your mother said?" Aunt Augusta inquired sharply.



"Do you mind, Mother?" Reba pursued.

"O dear, dear, *dear!*" her mother wailed, as if in physical torture, "I wish you wouldn't tease so! It always brings on my neuralgia."

A slight flush spread over Reba's cheeks. "But I'm twenty-five," she murmured. The last spark of her girlhood had gone out to-day. Were there to be no compensations? "You all go out when you want to. You don't ask permission. I don't see——"

She stopped short. Aunt Augusta had turned half-way round on the machine cover, and had pulled down her spectacles. She was glaring at the younger woman over their steel rims.

"Rebecca!" she exclaimed. Just the one word twice repeated, "Rebecca!"

Rebecca had always been terrified by Aunt Augusta's eyes when they glared at her over the rims of her glasses. They were like gray-striped monsters peering over a fence.

"Oh, I don't mean anything," hastily she assured her aunt. "I won't go, of course. Only—— Oh, I won't go. I don't really care about it."

Her hand fell away from the knob. She gave it up. She surrendered. She had always surrendered. With drooping shoulders she crossed the room to the door that led into the hall.

"Where are you going?" Aunt Augusta demanded.

"Nowhere. Just upstairs to my room. Do you mind?"

"You better put on your jacket," she suggested, pushing her glasses back into place, and resuming her stitching.

It was very warm in the house. The sisters liked

it at about eighty. Even upstairs the rooms were uncomfortably hot, after the furnace had had its shovelful of coal, and its draughts opened in the afternoon. But without a protest, Reba turned back, and opened the closet door. She took down a pink worsted sweater, slipped her arms into it, and went out into the hall.



## CHAPTER II

SHE walked slowly upstairs to her room. There was in her eyes somewhat the same acceptance-of-the-inevitable look as in a dog's trained obedience from puppyhood. She was as dumb and undemonstrative about it too. Even safely within her room, with the door closed, there was no gesture of impatience, no tears, no throwing herself down upon the bed—nothing of that sort. She simply sat down in another rocking-chair, by another window, and gazed out at another winter landscape.

Her bedroom was furnished in the brown-grained furniture of her young girlhood. There were pink rosebuds painted on each of the bureau drawers, and more rosebuds on the head of the bed. As Reba sat there, in the small square space allotted to her before she was born, her tortured spirit rocked back and forth on the little swinging perch inside her cage, as it had done so many times before, seeking relief. She mustn't mind, she mustn't care, silently she told herself. What difference did it make what she did—whether she went out, or stayed in, whether her wishes or her mother's and aunts' were gratified—what difference in the long run? What if she had never known, and now never would know, the heart-thrills, and the heartaches of youth? What if life was monotonous and humdrum? All that was no concern of *hers*. Her great task was self-mastery. Nothing else. The more hopes blasted, the more pleasures denied,



the more her way was crossed, and her will thwarted, the greater would be the triumph of her resignation. She must remember that. She must hold it before her like a light. It was weak and ignoble to beat oneself against circumstances. Back and forth her thoughts swung on the little perch. "Suppress, accept, submit," it squeaked.

Reba wished that she might reason with her physical feelings, too. For sometimes it seemed to her as if she must actually have swallowed the retorts she didn't make, the protests she restrained, and that her stomach rebelled. Such a wave of nausea now possessed her. But you wouldn't have guessed it. She rocked gently, her open palms relaxed, upturned. Whatever combat there was, should be inside, hidden. She waited patiently for the nausea to pass away, and when it had, she sat a long while, rocking there by the window, hugging her victory close for comfort, staring out at the pretty lights of the town.

Reba was glad that her grandfather had built his house upon a hill. She could see not only the stars in the sky, but those in the valley too. From her high lookout every light in every window in the valley made a star for Reba. Somebody had told her once, when she was a little girl, eight years old or so, that the stars in the sky were other worlds. Well, so were the stars in the valley—other worlds, other little worlds, and at dusk she used to make-believe that the souls of the little worlds came stealing shyly out, one after another to meet each other under the cover of night. She liked to watch them assembling, for even though the house she lived in did not join the others (Aunt Augusta always drew the shades down just as



soon as the few necessary lights were lit in the back of the house) it used to comfort Reba, make her feel less isolated, to be able to look down every night upon the friendly clustering in the valley.

The part of the town which her room overlooked was known as lower Ridgefield. It was there that many of the employees at the mills at the foot of Chestnut Street lived. They were Swedes and Poles, Greeks and Italians mostly. Reba had often wandered there after dark at night and she well knew that in scores of smoky little low-studded kitchens behind those stars in the windows supper was now being prepared. She could almost smell the frying potatoes and onions. She could almost feel the expectancy. The evening held nothing of expectancy for her. Eighty-nine Chestnut Street was lightless, lifeless, starless, a big black empty shell. But within sight of it, within sound, there was eagerness, joy, anticipation—somebody coming home to supper with a laugh and a hearty greeting; somebody coming to call after supper, a lover possibly; somebody coming for a visit next week; a baby expected next month perhaps—plans, preparations, hopes, fears, life!

The ribbons of twinkling mill-windows Reba loved best of all the lights in the valley. She had always been thankful for the mills. When she was a child Aunt Augusta had not allowed her to have a light outside her room when she went to bed. The thought of the big empty front bedrooms, the ceiled cubes of black, awesome silence, across the dark hall, used to fill her with overpowering fear. It was when she was five years old that the mills began running at night, and, Aunt Augusta or *no* Aunt Augusta, came steal-



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ing into her windows, to reassure her, like some kind, understanding parent, and sing her to sleep, with their pleasant hum. Not for anything would she have mentioned to her mother or aunts the comfort the mills were to her. They did not believe in coddling. They might have changed her room to the other side of the house, where there were only the fields, and the lonely farm-house to be seen, and where, instead of the distant chorus of revolving wheels and flying belts blended into harmonious din, was nothing to be heard out-of-doors except, in August and September, the mournful drone of crickets in the grass.

Even when she was older and no longer afraid of the darkness of night, the mills teeming with life and activity could pierce through the gloom of her eventless days.

Sitting now idle and listless in her rocking-chair, Reba found exhilaration in picturing to herself the contrasting scene down there behind the mill windows. She had intended to go down to the mills to-night and watch the employees pour out of the big side doors at six o'clock. She had intended to join the noisy throng herself for a little way, and bring back to this deadly quiet little bedroom of hers bits of boisterous laughter, impetuous speech, and joyous jargon to feed her starved soul on.

If Aunt Augusta hadn't interfered, and Reba had gone down to the mills, she would have hidden herself first in a secret corner by a brick fire-wall, as she had done many times before, and, thus concealed, would have watched the mill-hands wash up at the long row of soapstone sinks in the basement. She didn't know why it fascinated her so to watch those

curious male-creatures roll up their sleeves and lather their sinewy forearms generously with soap, then splash furiously, and make the suds fly—but it did, irresistibly. It gave her pleasure to see those big, boisterous, blackened men, make themselves clean and shining before going home to their women. Their rough-hewn features would be all scrimmed-up and dripping wet as they approached the roller-towels. Afterward they would come very close to Reba's corner (it was only in the winter when it was dark that she could stand there unobserved) and brush their hair before a little mirror hung by the window. She could have leaned and touched their heads, had the window been open.

There was one man whom Reba liked to watch in particular—an Italian she thought. He had very white teeth and dark eyes. His forearms were black and hairy. He was a big, jovial fellow. He would come over to the little mirror, with his thick hair all wet and tousled, and apply the brush to it vigorously until it lay flat and smooth and shone with dazzling high-lights, like patent-leather. He would make a straight, white part in it, on one side, and then stand there a moment, critically surveying himself. Many a time Reba wished she could tell him how beautiful she thought he was! What if his nails were rimmed with black machine grease? His skin was pink with scrubbing! His cheek-bones shone. His laugh was clear and bright. His vitality had something of the same indestructible crystal quality of one of the diamonds in her bracelet, she thought. It was this man whom Reba waited for so frequently of late, as she had seen some of the girls who worked in the



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mills wait for their men, and when he had passed, followed him, pretending he had greeted her with his big laugh; making believe she was keeping step beside him, even that his shoulder touched hers once in a while. After one of those secret meetings with the Italian, Reba would return to her room alarmed at the courage of her imagination, disturbed that she yielded to such self-indulgence, allowed her thoughts to stray so far into forbidden regions.

Eighty-nine Chestnut Street owed its existence to the mills at the foot of the hill. Somewhere behind those ribbons of stars down there Reba's father sat. His name appeared on the ground-glass panel of the door to the little room he occupied, painted in big black letters—David O. Jerome. David helped make out time-cards. His labors did not require a private office, but the Jerome Wire Company gave him one out of deference to the forty-six per cent. of the Company's shares which he owned. Also out of deference to those shares, he was invited to sit in one of the oak armchairs at the directors' meetings every month.

Reba's father was not what could be called an influential man in his business. He occupied that armchair as unobtrusively as he knew how. The truth was, David had no wish to interfere with a management that had miraculously transformed the stock, which since his father's death had gradually become as barren as a barnacled rock, into property rich and productive. There was never an off-year now. There was never a dividend passed. Ever since Joseph Horween had taken charge of affairs, the mills had yielded a harvest every season. As surely as Janu-



ary, April, July, and October appeared on the calendar over David's desk, there dropped like ripe fruit into his hands, from out of one of the Company's long blue envelopes, large, beautifully developed checks, quarter after quarter, year after year. David had long since exhausted the limited storing-space afforded him by all the savings-banks within range. Fearful as he was, and suspicious of any paper that had the peculiar crackle of a bond, or stock-certificate, he had been obliged to find bins for his dividends somewhere. In spite of suspicions, David's safe-deposit boxes became crammed with ripening coupons. No wonder, then, that at the directors' meetings, David always covertly glanced in the direction of the man who had brought about this happy state of prosperity, to discover how he was voting, even on unimportant questions, before committing himself to a raised hand, or a murmured "Aye."

Not that he approved of Mr. Horween's extravagant principles. He didn't. It was simply awful, the way Joseph Horween spent money! Every new-fangled cost-system, lighting, heating, or power device in the world attracted him. He was always building additions to the plant, too. It fairly made cold shivers run up and down David's back to stand by and see him using up the Company's surplus on such unnecessary expenditures as a fancy front to the office-building, a cement garage for his own automobile, and white-enameled sanitary drinking fountains for the employees. But commonsense told David it was safer to rely upon Joseph Horween's confidence, however inflated, than upon his own misgivings. Besides, discussion of business problems was not David's gift.



He was slow when it came to selecting words to express his opinions. The directors with whom he sat had a way of leaping so, leaving him way behind, mulling over and painfully trying to comprehend the significance of a vote that had just been passed, while they sprang nimbly ahead to fresh ones. No; better keep mum, David concluded, vote with the man whom fortune had so far favored, then close your eyes, hold your breath, and wait for the crash, which, if it should come, wouldn't be any of your doings anyway.

But at home David told himself that he played no such insignificant part. Up there in the gray house on the hill, he was a factor that had to be taken into consideration. In his own domain he bore all the marks of a tyrant. He was taciturn, churlish, stated his wishes gruffly, and wanted them obeyed without parley. David felt cross about all the time, when he was at home—"unhappy in his mind," Augusta expressed it. He said that a family consisting of an invalid wife, two interfering sisters-in-law, and a backboneless daughter, was enough to make a man feel unhappy in his mind. But the truth was that the most healing ointment that David could apply to his smarting pride, after spending the day monotonously making out time-cards, or sitting silent and submissive in the directors' room at the mills, where years ago his own father had been the ruling spirit, was to assume the rôle of despot somewhere at any cost. Besides, a man had to present something of an unyielding front in the same house where Augusta Morgan lived, or else be crushed and obliterated under her steam-roller methods.

Augusta Morgan was the kind of woman who made



everybody lie down flat, and fit into whatever chinks and crevices there happened to be, when once she made up her mind the course she meant to pursue—that is, if you got in her way, or didn't possess a good deal of steam power, yourself. There was nothing Augusta Morgan enjoyed more than smoothing out stretches of road out of repair in the lives of her family. But she smoothed them in only one way—the steam-roller way.

Her own father, David well knew, had died a broken and disappointed man, because this martINETTE of an oldest daughter of his, who, after her mother's death, ruled his house with iron masterfulness for years, denied him the privilege of remarrying; and Emma's husband had died groping for a hand he couldn't find, because Augusta Morgan, nursing him through his last sickness, decided when death was near not to summon Emma, his wife, asleep in the next room, who, she coolly concluded, needed her rest. Emma herself had become like pulp under her older sister's tyranny. So had Eunice. So had Reba.

Augusta Morgan was an able woman. There was no denying that. No job was too big for her. Competency radiated from her like kindness from some women. In her own way, she was as marvellous to David as Joseph Horween. They both had brought order out of confusion. They both had brought relief and peace of mind out of mental distress. David had only to recall that period of his life immediately preceding Augusta's advent, to realize how indispensable she was to him.

Augusta and Emma had just finished burying a cousin, who lived in Machias, Maine, when Reba's



mother had her runaway accident. The runaway accident, followed by a night of exposure spent by the roadside, had resulted in a serious illness for Eunice. When Augusta returned from Machias and appeared at 89 Chestnut Street she found David in a pitiable condition.

"They're ruining me, Augusta," he said to her in a voice that quavered. "They think I'm a rich man, and I'm not—I'm not! I don't know how many calls the doctors make, nor how many doctors call, nor how many specialists from Boston, nor how many of those expensive trained nurses I'm paying for at the rate of twenty-one dollars a week and board, nor who the woman is they call an accommodater they said I'd got to have in the kitchen, cooking my food and throwing it away untouched in the swill. I found eight whole boiled potatoes there last night, and half a loaf of bread yesterday, and the day before half a chicken. Yes, I did! Oh, they're ruining me—between them all, they're ruining me, Augusta."

Augusta placed her hands upon her hips. She was a tall woman, a good head-and-a-half taller than David. At forty-five she was a handsome woman, too, with ruddy cheeks, and crisp hair, brushed stiffly up from her forehead, and rolled into a formidable peak on top of her head. She thrust her chin toward David.

"Want me and Emma to come up here, and help you out, David?" she inquired. "Trained nurses! Accommodaters! Specialists! Bosh! It won't take me two hours to clean this house of such nonsense!"

David had always been afraid of this energetic sister-in-law of his. Best to keep a watch away from



big dynamos; best to keep away from Augusta Morgan. That is the way David had always felt. But he was in trouble now. He glanced up at Augusta and then quickly down again.

"Well," she demanded impatiently. "What do you say? Come, what do you say?"

David shook his head and sighed. "Do as you think best. Do as you think best, Augusta," he said.

Twenty-five years had passed since then, but David, as much as he believed he disliked Augusta, still looked upon her as the force that kept his life from flying apart into fragments and disorder. Not once since the day she had set foot in the house had there been any hired help to cook the food in the kitchen; not once since that day had a specialist from Boston, or from anywhere else, crossed the threshold of 89 Chestnut Street; and only for a brief two days when Reba was born and the town-doctor said he'd drop the case if Augusta wouldn't let him bring a trained nurse, had David been disturbed by the sight of white caps and uniforms.

Reba, too, looked upon Augusta Morgan as the force that had kept her life from flying apart. But, oh, *she* had *wanted* her life to fly apart! There was all the difference of youth and age between her and David. She had wanted no cement to bind together the thousand and one elements of her life. Like a seeded dandelion floating away on tiny white wings in a dozen different directions, but for Aunt Augusta, Reba too would have discovered the mysteries over the confining walls. However, she did not think accusingly of her aunt—not for any length of time. It wasn't in her nature. Immersed as her mother and

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aunts had always kept her in the dull gray atmosphere of this dull gray house, she knew it wasn't from unkindness. They had always done what they thought was for her "best good," as they expressed it. No pains had been spared in her bringing-up. "She's been hand-raised," Aunt Augusta was fond of boasting. "'Tisn't many girls who've had her advantages," she would say. "Private tutor ever since she was seven, hand-made clothes, every stitch, right down to her combinations. Tonsils out, and eyes examined I don't know how many times, and teeth straightened to the tune of fifty dollars."



### CHAPTER III

REBA had never been allowed to attend the public-schools in Ridgefield. They were not considered good enough for her. They were monopolized by the mill-hand children. When the question of Reba's schooling had first come up, Augusta had announced to David that her niece wasn't going to become contaminated by a lot of dirty, ill-kept foreigners, if *she* had anything to say about the matter. Of course she had a great deal to say. Ever since Reba was seven years old she had been taught by a private teacher at home.

Augusta Morgan was economical in the kitchen; she was economical in the sick-room too, but she had her extravagances. There's as much personality shown in the choice of one's economies, as in the choice of one's amusements. Augusta always scraped her mixing-bowls scrupulously clean. She never threw away a piece of wrapping-paper, nor a string, nor a candle end; and on the few occasions when she was obliged to order food in a restaurant, she always selected eggs hard-boiled, instead of soft, so as not to leave a particle of her money's worth on the dish. But when it came to such things as table-linen, for instance, sheets and towels, dress materials, sealskin coats, or schooling for Reba, she said the best was none too good for *her*.

Augusta considered herself something of an aristocrat. "Living in a house like this, and rich as you are, David Jerome, I'd be ashamed to send my child to



school with a lot of Poles and Greeks and Italians," she had told David when he had objected to the expense of private lessons. When Reba herself had objected (for she had looked forward to the companionship that would be sure to come with school) Aunt Augusta had retorted, "You don't know when you ought to be grateful, child. It's only very lucky little girls can have private tutors."

Miss Billings, whom Aunt Augusta engaged to come every week-day morning except Saturday, at eight o'clock, was a retired high-school teacher, considered too old for competent service, even when Reba was seven. She had continued to come every week-day morning except Saturday for ten years, to give Reba private lessons. She must have been near seventy when Reba was seventeen.

Reba recalled now how often throughout those ten long years she had stared wistfully through the high picket fence around the public school-yard at recess-time, when she was out taking exercise with Miss Billings, and wondered what it would be like to play with other children like that—run fast, make one's feet fly; how it would feel to strain one's self to the very limit in a hard-run race; to reach the outstretched hands of imprisoned comrades, and set them free with a wild shriek of "Relievo!" Then to trot back afterward to the home-base, with approving arms flung over one's shoulder.

Whenever Reba visualized her childhood she always saw a solitary little figure sitting somewhere on the long front tiers of granite steps in front of the house, patiently waiting till it was time to go indoors, moving over every little while as a big rectangular shadow



shoved her along, slowly, inch by inch, possessing itself of her sunshine and enveloping her at last completely with cold, gray gloom.

It was usually winter-time when Reba recalled that lonely child on the steps. She wore a little gray astrakhan tippet around her neck, and her hands were tucked inside a little round, gray muff to match. She was watching the coasters. In the winter-time, every afternoon when the sliding was good, the school-children used to come in crowds to coast down Chestnut Street. They flashed by her at a terrific speed, on flat, battered little rafts, stomachs down, legs stretched out behind, like leaping frogs, screaming shrilly at the top of their lungs. Reba herself was not allowed to slide down Chestnut Street. It was dangerous.

"Besides the company! Mill riff-raff!" Aunt Augusta sniffed. "You've got your own back-yard, and your own sled. You ought to be contented." But it was a very empty back-yard, with a very tame little slope, and it took a long while for a single sled to wear a track down it alone.

Some children who lacked brothers and sisters were provided with cousins, who occasionally came and "spent the day." But not Reba. The only prolific families in Reba's neighborhood appeared to be despised foreigners. She had never had a playmate—she had never had a *plaything* with any red-blood in it, not even a canary-bird. Once in a while she used to steal out to the forbidden barn (a perilous place with holes a child might slip through) and shyly approach the stall occupied by her father's solitary horse, courageously reaching up craving fingers and poking



them against the dumb creature's warm investigating nose.

A lonely childhood it had been, a lonely girlhood too.

She sighed now as she looked back down the long years to the time when Aunt Augusta first let down her skirts. They were eventless years—like a long narrow corridor, she thought, empty, unfurnished. She had few memories with which to decorate and adorn them. It seemed impossible, but she had never even had a girl-friend of her own. Oh, how could they blame her downstairs for the present barrenness?

As in most places the size and remoteness of Ridgefield, the social life of the town centered in and about the several churches. Hopefully, as Reba grew older, did she look toward the church as an avenue to the companionship she longed for. Her father and mother and aunts all attended the Congregational Church, were members there—her father was a deacon—and timidly, when Reba was fourteen she had asked permission to join the Christian Endeavor Society at the Congregational Church. But, "What! At your age?" Aunt Augusta had exclaimed. "Humph! I should say not! I've heard of the goings-on down at the church after the Christian Endeavor meetings. All half the girls and boys join the Christian Endeavor Society *for*, is to walk home with each other afterwards in the dark. *I* know. Some folks are willing to let their girls run wild, but you don't belong to that sort of family, Reba, and you ought to be glad of it."

At fourteen Reba never even went to morning-service alone. One or the other of her two aunts was



always there in the pew beside her, with the Morgan keep-off, don't-speak-to-me air imprinted unmistakably on tightly-shut lips and primly folded hands.

Boarding-school had gone the same way as public-school and the Christian Endeavor Society. It was when Reba was first beginning to despair of ever meeting any young people that she heard that the Methodist minister's daughter was going away for a year to a girls' boarding-school. She brought the news home one afternoon, and in a voice that trembled with entreaty, wondered if she, too, might not go away for a year to a girls' boarding-school. She had learned by now that her father could really afford anything. She wanted to go so, she said,—they couldn't know *how* much she wanted to go! She had never been anywhere alone away from home. "But what's the use," Aunt Augusta had argued, "in exposing Reba at her impressionable age to the foolish notions of fifty-odd girls, brought up every which way, whose folks we've never seen nor heard of. No, sir! I prefer to keep my eye on Reba, till she's settled down to what she's going to be. Best let a custard set before disturbing it. That's *my* rule. We're fortunate in Miss Billings. Miss Billings can take her through Latin as well as any boarding-school, I guess. I don't intend to let any public, money-making institution go and spoil Reba for us now. I'll tell you what we'll do. We'll have her father buy her a grand-piano and she can take music-lessons instead."

A piano instead of fifty shining opportunities of a girl-friend all her own! Piano-lessons instead of some one to share confidences with! Oh, the pity of it! Reba glanced down now at the bracelet on her wrist, and



shook her head. They had given her that bracelet instead of a coveted week at Northfield, when the church had wanted to send her as a delegate to a conference there. They had given her her gold watch instead of an automobile trip to Boston with the Horweens. Always, *always*, they had given her things that money could buy, instead of things that money couldn't.

At seventeen Rebecca Jerome had learned all that Miss Billings could teach her. She could translate a little French, a little Latin, and a little Greek, with the aid of various dictionaries. She could recite the dates of the births and deaths, and principal works, of all the English poets, from Chaucer down. She was an excellent speller. She had been introduced to geometry and algebra. She could, moreover, play two or three pieces without her notes, on the grand-piano. She could make long neat rows of faultless stitches, paint in oils on china. She gave no trouble at all, as most girls do, teasing to go out, and was not "silly" about boys. She spoke to people nicely, too, with a precise correctness that was very pleasing to Aunt Augusta. She was pretty, in a soft suppressed sort of way—had brown, fawn-like eyes, a smooth olive complexion, faintly pink at times. At seventeen Rebecca was like a little tight yellowish-pink rosebud. Sometimes such a little bud fades in its vase before it opens.

But Augusta and Emma and Eunice had no notion that Reba would fade before she opened. They had a plan for her. They were going to let down her skirts later, and roll up her hair, and when she was eighteen Aunt Augusta was going to take her for two weeks to a fashionable summer-resort abounding in desirable young people. For as intolerant as she had



been of "boys" for girls of fourteen, she felt a thrill of delight at the prospect of the handsome and eligible young men who would some day come paying respects to Reba.

"She's getting to be quite a young lady. You'll have to watch out," Reba recalled the minister having smilingly said to her mother and aunts when she appeared before him for the first time in her lengthened skirts. "There'll be young men coming thick and fast now, I'm thinking."

How they had beamed! Inwardly how she had beamed too. Aunt Augusta had had the parlor furniture re-covered in preparation for the minister's prediction. All three of the women who had tended Reba so long, with such diligence, expected wonderful things of her when at last she stood before them a finished young lady. When they began removing life-long restraints from Reba they observed her as eagerly as if (instead of being anything so ruled by the laws of nature as a girl, or even a rose) she were a magical Japanese flower that had only to be dropped into a glass of water to unfold into marvelous beauty.

But Reba disappointed them. For five years Aunt Augusta repeated the two weeks at the fashionable summer-resorts, but it was absolutely useless. No handsome and eligible young men came courting Reba. No young men of any kind came courting her. In spite of long skirts and turned-up hair, removed restrictions, summer-resorts full of young people, diamond bracelets, gold watches and chains, Reba would not unfold. Occasionally one finds a Japanese flower that refuses to bloom in the water. It has been too tightly compressed. So had Reba.



The weeks spent at the summer hotels with Aunt Augusta had all been periods of torture. "Why don't you go off with the young folks?" Aunt Augusta would ask. "I don't see! It beats me! Here you are down here, in this expensive place, and all you do is to hide around alone among the rocks, and sit on the piazza, and sew, and rock! My grief, you're the queerest I ever saw! Why don't you join in and have a nice time?"

"Why don't I join in and have a nice time with the sea-gulls?" Reba wanted to reply, but she never "talked back" to Aunt Augusta. "Oh, I don't care about it," was all she would ever say.

The truth was that the young people at the summer-resorts Reba visited were creatures of a different breed from her. They made different motions, uttered different sounds; they could laugh and joke banter; they could play tennis and golf; they could dance, swim. Miss Billings had taught Reba none of these.

"But my lands," Aunt Augusta had argued once. "You don't have to swim, to go in bathing, do you? You haven't had on your bathing-suit but just once, and after all the pains we took!"

The thought of that "just once" had made Reba blush with shame as she recalled it. One of the young people in the group, which Aunt Augusta wanted Reba to join, had smiled and whispered, "Look!" to a tanned, half-naked young man beside her, when Reba first timidly appeared on the beach in the bathing-suit modeled by Aunt Augusta and Aunt Emma and her mother in the first-floor bedroom at home.

They hadn't been able to get a pattern for a bathing-suit in Ridgefield, and they had guessed all wrong.



The sleeves were long; the skirt reached half-way to her ankles; and it buttoned down behind! It seemed to Reba that *all* her carefully made clothes were peculiar beside the creations worn by the young people at the summer-hotels. She had been glad that the big rocking-chairs on the verandas had such high, concealing backs. They helped hide Aunt Augusta as well as herself. Aunt Augusta was an extraordinarily tall woman. People stared at her.

Yet, in spite of such disheartening experiences, repeated year after year, Reba had never quite lost faith that sometime—*somehow*—the choice of a summer-resort would prove more fortunate. Each season, for weeks before the actual day of departure, she nursed a secret hope that this time circumstances would be kinder. She never started forth without having wistfully air-castled for days upon the possibility of running across somebody, among all the strangers *this* year—man or girl, it wouldn't matter which—just *somebody* who would be willing to become her friend; somebody she could walk and talk with, and—thrilling thought—write letters to afterward! The mail had never been a source of eager expectations to Reba.

But out of all the five fortnights spent at the summer-resorts (Aunt Augusta had abandoned the experiment finally) Reba treasured but *one* pleasant memory, and that a small one—simply the kind, and as she now analyzed it, probably pitying, invitation from a young man—a wonderful creature in white flannels—to join a sailing-party of young people. She hadn't accepted, of course. Why, even his smile, and his clear eyes looking straight at her, had struck her almost dumb. But he had asked her! He had thought it possible to



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ask her! In spite of the tall gaunt spectre that stood beside her, in spite of her own hair done the wrong way—crimped (she did it up on hair-pins at night) and pompadoured, Japanese fashion—and her white kid shoes with heels, when they should have been buckskin and flat, in spite of such handicaps, a young god had once bowed before her, and lifted his hat, and asked her to be one of his sailing-party. Reba smiled now at the dim recollection.

What a pitifully meager little memory for a woman of twenty-five to be treasuring! How pitifully meager everything had always been in her life. What a failure she was anyhow! She, who might have made the lives of those women downstairs green again with her youth, had not done so. They had thought that there would be party-frocks to make for her (they loved to sew), sheets to tear, napkins to hem, a wedding-dress perhaps, and—daring supposition—baby-clothes possibly sometime. It was because of their disappointment in her that her mother and her aunts had become so bitter. With every one of her succeeding birthdays it became more and more clear that the future would soon hold nothing more of surprise or anticipation for them. In maturing Reba had robbed the sisters of the joy of the unfulfilled.

Gazing down at the lights in the valley she told herself that another girl in her place would have re-created this gray mausoleum of a house, made of it a thing to shine and sparkle like other houses. She had only herself to blame for the unused, unlit front rooms, she supposed. Aunt Augusta had done her part. She had made ready the rooms at the proper time with new



brocade coverings and lace tidies in preparation for the young men callers that never came.

Only once had the lights in the parlor been lit for a young man caller for Reba, and then he had been one of the employees at the mills. He had had an unpronounceable Polish name. Of course he hadn't come again. Aunt Augusta told Reba afterward that she hadn't had the parlor done over to entertain foreigners in! However, the young man hadn't asked to come again. In her honest heart, Reba knew he hadn't wanted to. It had been a painful evening. Oh, she had no charm, just as they had said downstairs; it wasn't *in* her to attract. They were right, she guessed.

Suddenly the long-drawn-out blast of the six o'clock mill whistle sounded. Reba was as familiar with its deep hollow voice as with her mother's high whine. She had lived all her life with the mill whistle. Would she still be sitting here in the same little room, in the same little chair, five, ten, fifteen, twenty years from now, listening to the same mill-whistle toll off the eventless hours? The monotony of her existence swept over Reba in a big engulfing wave. The lights at the foot of the hill, in spite of herself, melted into a gold sea before her vision. Older people used to tell her, first shaking their heads dismally, to make the most of her childhood. She had thought *then* that growing old simply meant *work* instead of *play*. But the tragedy of age she knew *now* was disillusion. A tear rolled down her face and splashed upon her wrist.

She stood up. "This won't do," she whispered resolutely. "This simply *won't* do."

She crossed the room and lit the gas by the bureau (it was quite dark now), afterward pulled down the



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shades. Then she went over to a small marble-topped oval table by her bed, and got her Bible. She moved a chair under the light, and opened the Bible to the second chapter of Exodus. She was reading the book through for the third time.

"Reba! Reba!" she was suddenly interrupted by the voice of Aunt Augusta calling from below.

Her aunt was standing, she well knew, at the foot of the stairs, with one hand on the black-walnut newel-post, and her chin lifted. "Reb-a!" she called again, drawing out the last syllable with an effective crescendo.

Reba rose and opened the door.

"Yes," she replied.

"Come down here," briefly her aunt called.

Reba laid her Bible on the marble-topped table and went downstairs.

## CHAPTER IV

AS she reëntered her mother's room, she observed at a glance that something important had happened since she left it an hour ago. Aunt Emma had removed all the pins from her mouth. Her mother's usually lusterless eyes were bright, and there was a little color in her pasty cheeks. Aunt Augusta was clearing up her work, putting away spools, and rolling up bits of silk and tape and binding with expressive jerks and jabs.

Reba asked what had happened and learned in one brief, inflamed announcement that some one was coming to supper!

No one ever came to supper!

"But who?" she gasped.

"It's nobody we invited. You may be sure of that," Aunt Augusta replied. "Patience Patterson never did have any manners—pushing herself into everybody's face and eyes! I told her we had an invalid up here, and couldn't have company to meals, the way we'd like, but to come and make us a call sometime. She said we mustn't make company of her; she'd come straight up and have supper with us, and stay till her train went back to Union at nine-fifty to-night. She's off to Tampico, or Porto Rico—some outlandish place—to-morrow, and this would be the only chance she'd get, she said," Aunt Augusta's voice assumed a scornful, mincing tone, "of seeing all us good people. Hypocrite! I started to explain that excitement was



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bad for Eunice, but she cut me right off and hung up, and said she'd be up about half-past six. I don't even know where she telephoned from."

"Shall I go and get Mrs. O'Brien?" asked Reba.

Mrs. O'Brien was a very old Irish woman who washed sheets, towels, and flannels at the Jerome house every other week, and on the two or three occasions when the minister and his wife had been invited for Sunday dinner she had cleared the table and brought on the dessert.

"No, you needn't," snapped Aunt Augusta. "We'll put on no lugs for Patience Patterson."

"Oh, do let me run down to Buffum's and get a quart of oysters for a stew," pleaded Reba. "It won't take me ten minutes."

"Certainly not," replied Aunt Augusta. "Cold lamb, and bread and butter's good enough for any one."

"Well, but I can put on the best china, can't I, and the silver teapot?"

"No, you can't. We'll put on nothing extra. Good lands, Reba, Patience Patterson's nobody."

"I know, but I thought—being company—we have so little chance to use the best china anyhow—I thought——"

"Now, don't tease, Reba. You can light up the parlor, and that's all."

Patience Patterson was a second cousin to Reba's father. The kinship was not close, but relatives on her father's side were scarce, and the prospect of entertaining Cousin Pattie, as she was known in Ridgefield, was an event to Reba.

Reba was only thirteen years old when she saw Cousin Pattie last, but she could recall her perfectly—



a large, shapeless woman—short-breathed and wheezy, and with a very red face. Reba had liked to hear her laugh. When anything particularly amused Cousin Pattie, she would snort like a young pig when she drew in her breath. She was well-known in Ridgefield. Although she hadn't been there for years now, she hadn't allowed her native town to forget her. Every half-year or so, during the long intervals between her flying visits, she was in the habit of sending letters to be read out-loud to the Ladies' Society at the Congregational Church, at their Friday afternoon meetings, describing the strange sights and customs in the foreign countries which she took such delight in exploring. Cousin Pattie's letters never failed to arouse in Aunt Augusta expressions of disapproval. "My lands," she'd scoff, "I can remember when Patience Patterson worked in the mills, her folks were so poor, and now she's writing letters to the Ladies' Society about the things *she's* done, and the things *she's* seen, and calling us 'dear old home friends!' Slush!"

The letters were written in an offhand, careless style, with many dashes and underlines and unfinished sentences. They bristled with superlatives and exclamation-points, from start to finish. Steeped in the New England tradition that restraint is a virtue, the letters perplexed Reba. She didn't think them quite nice; but just as she had found their author's laughter, with the grunt in it, captivating, as a child, so the letters fascinated her. She always wished she could hear them twice.

When Cousin Pattie arrived at her Cousin David's that night, she was panting so, that she couldn't say a word for ten minutes at least. She could simply



smile and nod, and make motions with her hands on her chest, in the region of her windpipe. Finally she was able to gasp something about "the hill," "bless me," and "my breath."

It seemed to Reba that she was heavier than ever. She must weigh two hundred and fifty pounds, Reba thought. When she was able to take off her things, she exposed hands like the butcher's, with fat pink fingers, with rings on them that made the flesh bulge. Her arms were like great soft legs, and she called attention to her wrists, that looked like swollen ankles, by wearing a leather strap tightly around one with a watch on it. Her face was as red as Reba remembered it. There were dark purple veins in her cheeks which looked like rivers and tributaries in a geography book. Her hair was carelessly knotted—no wonder! Probably she couldn't reach it very well with those arms—and the waterfalls of lace down the front of her broad bosom were not very clean. She wheezed and laughed continually in the same old way. Before she had been in the house half an hour, Reba caught the ridiculous little grunt. But nobody else laughed *with* Cousin Pattie. Her abundant good-nature could not melt the frigid reception that had been prepared for her.

David was not in evidence at all when she first arrived. He had shut himself up in his room upon his arrival from the factory (he looked upon Cousin Pattie's advent as a personal injury) and he stayed there until Aunt Augusta's "David! David! Supper!" crescendoing from the newel-post had routed him out.

All through the evening meal it seemed to Reba as if she couldn't endure it if some one didn't say some-



thing besides "Yes," and "No," and "You don't say!" in response to Cousin Pattie's tireless attempts at friendliness. David didn't give voice to as much as that. At the head of the table, with his shoulders stooped over his plate, and his head bent, as if he were saying a continual grace, David simply glowered as he stared into his plate and shoveled food, snapping now and then, like an angry animal, at his knife. Whenever David felt out-of-sorts, he ate with his knife. It took the place of swearing with him. Also, as an expression of displeasure, he would frequently don a disreputable old smoking-jacket, which Aunt Augusta had long ago declared she'd never put needle to again. He wore it to-night. Reba had blushed scarlet when she saw him appear in the dining-room in the frayed old garment. It was a trying meal for Reba.

But Cousin Pattie didn't seem to mind it. She kept up a steady flow of cheerful talk, as she folded thin slice after thin slice of cold lamb on the end of her fork, depositing it all at once, safely into her large mouth, and washing it down with water, to which she helped herself frequently from the glass bottle at her left.

"I wasn't going to leave this corner of the world," she explained early in the meal, "till I'd dropped in on you folks, and broken bread with you. I said to Hattie Miles—I've been stopping with Hattie for two weeks down in Union—I'm going up to see my Auntie Bliss, and Cousin David and his folks, if it takes a leg. I'm off to San Domingo day after to-morrow," she tucked in. "Sudden," she went on. "Didn't know I was going till yesterday afternoon. Thought I had



all sorts of time to get all caught-up and acquainted again with all my old Ridgefield friends. I told Hattie this morning I was *bound* to put in my last day 'Ridgefielding'! So I've been doing the town all day. Came up on an early train, made eleven calls in all, and had a real good time. Dinner this noon with Auntie Bliss, nearest relative on my mother's side, and now supper with Cousin David and you folks. It's just *splendid* to get back to these blessed old hills," she exclaimed. "No place like home, you know," she chuckled. "No place in this world like New England. That's what I say! Bless me, I wouldn't have missed this little chance to see you good people for anything in this world. No, I wouldn't, I declare! Seems to me Eunice is looking pretty well."

"Well, I'm not feeling so," objected the invalid.

"What a shame! My heart just goes out to anybody tied to a chair." It wasn't a topic that was ever discussed, and Aunt Augusta's eyes grew dark and angry. "Twenty-five years! Bless me! I couldn't be so patient. You're just a wonder, Eunice. Anyhow, Augusta, the years don't seem to have made much impression on you. You don't look a day older."

"Well, I *am*!" snapped Aunt Augusta.

"The only change I see," unscathed Cousin Pattie went on, "is in Reba here. She was just a child when I was here before, and now I expect she's old enough to get married. Perhaps she's going to be, for all I know. Perhaps the day's all set. Dear me! You know the girls over there in Japan get married—" and she launched forth on a long lively description of Japanese customs. David, at this juncture, with no excuse or word of explanation, shoved back his chair and went



out of the room. Cousin Pattie at that only tucked in, "David hasn't changed a mite," and continued with her narrative.

It was when she had finished the carefully allotted two halves of stewed pears in her pressed-glass saucy-dish that she began gathering up all the soiled silver within reach and piling it on a plate nearby.

"Come on, you've got to let me help clear up," she said. "I haven't forgotten how. Not by a long shot. Glasses and silver first; china next; then pots and pans; dish-towels last. Let *me* wash. I like the feeling of dishwater trickling through my fingers. Brings back my girlhood. Come, Reba, pass over your silver."

"Reba," broke in Aunt Augusta sternly, "you take your Cousin Patience into the parlor. We'll attend to things here!" she announced.

"Wanted to get into the kitchen, and see what sort of a place that was, I suppose," contemptuously she went on, when Reba had obediently led Cousin Pattie out of the dining-room. "Wanted to get her eye into our refrigerator, no doubt, and tell that Hattie Miles what we got in it. Well, I guess not! I won't have Patience Patterson step foot in *my* kitchen." Then, "Reba!" she called abruptly. "Reba!"

"Yes," came from the front hall.

"Your mother's pills."

"Nobody ever thinks of *me* when there's anything else to think about," the invalid had been whining.

"I'll be back in a minute," said Reba to Cousin Pattie. "Will you wait in the parlor till I come?" she asked politely.



## CHAPTER V

WHEN Reba returned, three minutes later, she found Cousin Pattie in the parlor chuckling to herself, her soft flesh all a gentle tremor, like a mold of perfectly mixed gelatine. She was gazing at a big vase full of dried hydrangeas on the table in the corner.

"They were there twelve years ago," she exclaimed when Reba joined her. "I declare! Those same hydrangeas!"

"Oh, no," Reba corrected gently. "Not the same ones. I cut fresh ones every other year."

Cousin Pattie stopped chuckling, and gazed at Reba.

"How ever in the world do you stand it?" she exclaimed.

"Stand it?" queried Reba.

"Why," went on Cousin Pattie, "it would drive *me* crazy—the thought that I'd got to repeat a job even for every other *week* for a *year*—but every other *year*, for heaven knows how long, good lands! The monotony of it! How do you stand it—a young thing like you, Reba?"

Reba flushed.

"Why, I don't know," she stumbled, "I'm used to it, I guess." Then, "Wouldn't you like to see our family album?" she asked politely. "Pictures of people are so interesting, I think."

"Thanks," replied Cousin Pattie, "but I saw it last time, and, I declare, *you* showed it to me too, and

asked me in just the same pretty way, twelve years ago. Lordy! Lordy!" she ejaculated, and sank into a deep, voluminous stuffed chair. "I can see," she went on, "how your mother stands doing the same things over and over again, year in and year out. She *has* to. She's tied to a wheel-chair—but *you*—young and well and strong! It's beyond me."

"It isn't always wheel-chairs," timidly Reba replied, "that—that—" she stopped, embarrassed.

"No," took up Cousin Pattie. "Sometimes it's Aunt Augustas, eh, Reba?" She winked at Reba. "Bless me," she went on, "when I was your age I was tied to about ten wheel-chairs of one kind or another, but I got rid of them somehow. I staved 'em to pieces and tossed them aside—all of them, all but one; that is," she added laughingly, "my *flesh*, and that I lug around with me. Of course it interferes somewhat," she confessed. "I have to give up mountain-climbing for the most part, though I did get a look down into the crater of Vesuvius. I tell *you*," she went on, "I don't let obstacles stop *me*. Not by a long shot. When I was your age I made up my mind I wouldn't go and get meek and submissive, even though I was born in New England. I wouldn't go and crawl underneath my cross, and stay there, calling myself good and pious, like half the women I've been seeing to-day, when all the time," she concluded with vehemence, "they're too weak and scared to go out and fight the difficult circumstances heaven has sent them. Oh, I get all out of patience with New England women sometimes. I've had a big dose of them to-day, and you mustn't mind the way I talk."

"Oh, I don't, I don't," murmured Reba.



"Why, they seem to think," she ran on, "that there's virtue in the mere act of enduring. Jesus Christ endured," she burst forth, bringing the color afresh to Reba's cheeks. One spoke that name only in church or in a lowered tone. "But lands," sacrilegiously it seemed to the girl, Cousin Pattie plowed ahead, "He endured things for the sake of something He wanted, and wanted *bad*. He had a big, driving purpose, just the way Columbus had, or Lieutenant Scott, or Napoleon, or Joan of Arc. Hardships were just incidental in the lives of men and women like them. While here, the hardships are the whole show. How much you can grin and bear is of more importance than what you're grinning and bearing it *for*. *Here*, if you do chance to be born with some big passion that interferes with your meekly bearing your infirmities, then the sooner you pluck it out, and crush it, and submit yourself to your fate, the better for your soul. Humph!" she gave a shrug of impatience. "That's all wrong, Reba," she declared. "Dead wrong!"

Reba had never heard any one talk such heresy as this. It struck at the very foundation of her lifelong belief in resignation.

"Come here," abruptly Cousin Pattie ordered. Then, "See that tooth?" she inquired, rather inelegantly stretching her mouth well to the left, and pointing with a stubby, unmanicured forefinger to a large molar. "See how gray it is beside the others, and dead-looking? A year or two ago a dentist put wires down into all its roots, and bit by bit, gradually dragged out every atom of feeling there was in it. It seems to me a good many women around here are like that tooth. All the nerve in 'em has been taken out, bit by



bit, so there's no kick left. *They'll* never make any more trouble than that tooth will. I bet you God hates to see the pep he's thought best to put into us, picked out like that, and leave us meek as Moses, and no-account. I don't believe He likes it for a cent. Do you?" she asked abruptly.

"Perhaps not," murmured Reba.

"What big passion have *you* got driving *you*?" demanded Cousin Pattie.

Reba's soul squirmed within her at the staggering inquiry.

"Oh, none; I don't believe I've any big passion," she replied.

"None? Do you mean there's nothing you want that you haven't got in this world?" incredulously Cousin Pattie followed her up.

"Oh, yes; I suppose there are things I want, of course."

"Well, what? What are they?"

"Why, I want—" she began, then stopped. How could she explain—what she wanted was so vague—people, life, adventure, youth. Youth! And she was twenty-five. Oh, it was too late for what *she* wanted.

"Oh, I don't know," she ran to cover. "There used to be things I wanted, but I guess there's nothing special *now*. I'm twenty-five years old to-day!" she finished.

"Twenty-five!" Cousin Pattie raised both her fat hands, then let them drop dead weights on the arms of the chair. "Dear, dear, dear!" she sighed. "If *I* was only twenty-five again! Just at the start! Life all before me. And with *your* money—and no asthma—and *thin*! Goodness, what wouldn't I do? It never



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struck me," she raced on, "as wicked for a person to do what he wanted, just so 'twas self-respecting and didn't hurt anybody else. *I* wanted to see the world. Why, when I was a child, whenever I stood up in school and bounded a country, the very names—the Arctic Ocean, the Caribbean Sea, the Coral, the Gulf of Guinea, the Bay of Bengal—called to me. Maps would get my cheeks all hot with excitement, tugging at my heartstrings. The bottoms of my feet fairly itched to press the ground of lavender Austria some day, green Turkey, pink India, lemon-colored China. I wanted to *taste* the river Jordan, *touch* the walls of Jerusalem, *smell* India, *see* a monkey hanging by his tail from a tropical tree, *hear* a dozen of them chatter in an African jungle. And I *have*—I *have*! But it hasn't been by surrender. My mother died, and left me at fifteen a penniless orphan. I was sent to my Uncle John's to help with the housework, for my board, but I didn't submit myself long to any such heaven's will as that! I went down and worked at the mills with the foreigners, and paid somebody else to do my chores at Uncle John's, and laid by two dollars a week in the bank. Oh, I didn't submit myself to *anything* that stood in the way of my ambition—not even an infirmity I had of making a noise like a fog-horn whenever I blew my nose. I had an inspiration to advertise as a travelling companion, when, after two years at the mills I'd saved up only a little over seventy-five dollars. It took me a long while to land my first job, but finally a lady in Union, who was going to Florida for the winter, engaged me. I was terribly excited. I'd never even been across the state-line. But on the second day in New York she told



me I'd got to go back. She simply couldn't stand another single hour of hearing me blow my nose like that. I was pretty well disappointed at first. I couldn't help the way I blew my nose. It was made that way. 'But, look here,' I said to myself on the train going home, 'why not get it made different then?' And I did. I went down to Boston, and I paid a specialist fifty dollars out of my seventy-five, and he made my nose over! And now I don't have to blow it very often, and when I do, it doesn't sound like a fog-horn. Get rid of your infirmities! That is what I say. Don't accept 'em. I *tried* to get rid of my fat. I found being so fat stood in the way of my placing myself as a travelling companion. I dieted like mad, but it was no go. I almost put myself in my grave. It appeared that if I was to see the world, I must see it *fat*. Also it appeared that if I was to see the sea, I must see it *sick*. I'm not a good sailor. But—rule two—don't let infirmities you can't get rid of, get rid of your ambition. Put them in the pack on your back, like the man in *Pilgrim's Progress*, and trudge along. Want to know my motto? It's a good one. Just three words—'In spite of'. You got a motto, Reba?"

"Thy will—not mine," flashed across the girl's mind, but she couldn't repeat those words to Cousin Pattie now, after she had just riddled them full of holes.

"I don't believe I have," she said in a low voice.

Cousin Pattie gazed at Reba reflectively. The girl was sitting on the edge of a straight-backed chair, with her feet very close together on the floor, and her hands folded on her knees which were hugged close together.



"I just wondered what you would be like," Cousin Pattie remarked.

"I suppose I've changed," Reba made answer, glancing up timidly.

"Changed! I wish to heaven you had!" vehemently the older woman exclaimed. "I said to myself last time I was here, 'She is like a bell that's never been rung' and you seem just the same to me now. I wish to goodness somebody would get hold of the end of your rope and make you thrill and tremble with the wonder that's in you. I wish *I* could get hold of it."

Reba looked down at her folded hands abashed, and was silent. Cousin Pattie shook her head and sighed audibly, as much as to say, "I give you up." Then, "You're like a pool of water," she broke out afresh. "Stuck up here all alone on your New England hill-top—no inlet, no outlet, and if you don't do something about it you'll dry up, as sure as preaching. There won't be anything left of you but the shallow impression of your shape and size."

Reba still looked at her folded hands. "It's hard sometimes," she groped, "to do one's duty, and at the same time, to—to——"

"Pooh, pooh!" broke in Cousin Pattie. "Don't tell me *you're* one of those cowards hiding under a duty-cross. I hoped you'd inherited some of your ancestors' get-up-and-go. You must have a little of *my* blood in your veins, and the aunt whose name you've got was no weakling. And besides, there's your own grandfather! They say characteristics skip generations. Your grandfather was a courageous man, Reba, —cantankerous old fellow, but no coward, I can tell you that. He didn't let *his* conscience grow into a fat



monstrosity. He saw to it that his sense of duty took its proper place among his other senses. It was your own grandfather, child, who put the mills at the foot of the hill onto the Massachusetts map. They didn't amount to a row of pins till he came along. It was your own grandfather who broke away from this everlasting New England holding-back and going-easy, and had the courage of his convictions to defy a whole family's advice, borrow huge sums of money, run risks, something awful, I'm told, all by himself, and simply hack his way through to success. Don't let your grandfather Jerome be ashamed of you, Reba, in his grave, as he was, before he died, of his son. Show him *you* can defy too. Show him *you* can ride over obstacles, and get what you want as well as himself. For I know there's something you want, Reba, though you won't tell me what it is. Hello!" she interrupted herself. "Here's Augusta. Come in, Augusta. I've been talking to Reba here like a dutch uncle. But I guess now I better go and visit a while with poor Eunice, and show her my postcards."

"Eunice is abed," announced Augusta Morgan. "Excitement always brings on one of her nervous spells. Emma's rubbing her. You better sit right here. I've told David to go hitch up. It'll be time to start for your train pretty soon. Reba can play for you till it's time to go."

Augusta approached the big black, shiny piano, closed as tight as a tomb, and very carefully proceeded to open it, revealing a spotless row of black and white keys, which she brushed gently with a silk duster.

"I noticed your new piano," Cousin Pattie remarked appreciatively. "I don't believe they're many in Ridge-



field as fine as that. Play something lively for me, Reba, and put on all the loud pedals."

But Reba's pieces were not lively ones, and she had always been cautious with the loud pedal—her playing sounded more like the tinkling of a harp—but she did as well as she knew how. Afterward she looked up to see her father standing in his overcoat in the doorway.

"All ready," he said briefly. Then, "Is there any need of an illumination in here?" he growled, and approached the high gas-chandelier and turned off one of the two lights Reba had lit.

Cousin Pattie chuckled. "My! David. Anybody'd think you were a poor man, and couldn't afford those lights!"

"Rich or poor, waste is wicked," David remarked.

"Waste of good-nature over trifles is wicked, David," she replied. Then with a mighty effort she drew herself out from the depths of the armchair and got to her feet.

"You all wait a minute," she said, leaning down, and proceeding to lift her outside skirt. From a deep pocket concealed somewhere in her voluminous petticoat, she drew out and placed on the mantel four little objects—a homeopathic pill-bottle, corked and labeled, a bit of gilt mosaic, a small pebble, and an imitation scarab. "Presents," she explained. "I always like to leave a little remembrance of some sort when I come. This is for you, Augusta," she pointed to the bottle. "Water from the Dead Sea; and this pebble, from the banks of the Ganges, is for Emma; and this bit of mosaic, which I picked out of a floor in Pompeii, is for Eunice; and this, Reba, this is a

scarab for you. I bought it from a little Egyptian boy in Cairo. Now," she abruptly switched off, "I'll run up and put my bonnet on." She glanced at the watch on her wrist. "It's much too early for my train, but," she suggested good-naturedly, "seeing you're all hitched up, David, I'm just going to ask you to let me run in to Martha Rand's, on my way to the depot and make her a five-minute call. There's plenty of time."

"See how I worked getting your father to take me to Martha's?" she sparkled triumphantly at Reba, when the girl accompanied her to the spare-chamber to help her on with her things. "Of course, you've got to have some imagination, as well as courage, to get what you want in this world. You've got to probe around and find the roundabout ways. Remember that, Reba, and remember too whose grandchild you are, and don't be afraid to put on the loud pedal. Good-by." She leaned suddenly and kissed Reba, rather damply, full on her mouth. Then, "Keep that scarab I brought," she said; "it will bring you luck. It stands for resurrection in Egypt."



## CHAPTER VI

REBA sat a long while that night in the dark, in her rocking chair by the window, but she did not rock. Her palms did not lie upturned in her lap. She sat on the edge of her chair tensely, with her elbows on the window-sill, and tried to warm her cold hands and cool her hot face by pressing her clammy fingers hard against her burning cheeks and forehead. She had slipped the scarab, which was hung onto a string, about her neck. It was carved out of wood—a rough imitation of the genuine thing, but it was curious and foreign, and she picked it up every now and then and held it in her fingers. She had read that in Egypt scarabs were put into the tombs of the dead, as some sort of symbol or sign of the soul's awakening. Had Cousin Pattie left the scarab with *her*, in *her* tomb, to suggest her awakening? Were Cousin Pattie's jibes at New England women really thrusts at her? And were Cousin Pattie's interpretations of life correct? Why, if humility before God's will, selflessness, resignation, were unwelcome in His sight, then what refuge was there for her? Surely Cousin Pattie's words were those of a tempter, who would persuade Reba from her straight and difficult path. She would try to forget them. But even in her attempt and while she repeated the words of her favorite hymn, "My Savior, as Thou wilt," her eyes *would* be seeing Cousin Pattie's symbols—the dead tooth, the silent bell, the



pool, the cowardly woman hiding underneath a cross. Her fingers *would* feel the scarab.

The next morning, after a night of restless sleep, Reba started out for a walk. She could always think best when she was walking. The farther behind she left the unfriendly atmosphere of 89 Chestnut Street, the clearer her vision always became. It was somewhat the same with the town itself; not with lower Ridgefield—lower Ridgefield was Italy, and Greece and Sweden—but with the part of the town to which she was indigenous. She always wanted to get away from the frowning front-doors and gaping windows of Ridgefield proper. Her mother and aunts devoured passers-by, relishing most the ones they could disapprove of the most heartily. Reba always felt that she was being devoured in like manner when she walked by the houses of the people who had been cut up into morsels at 89 Chestnut Street.

Ridgefield was a typical New England town of some three or four thousand people. Running through its Main Street it had a double-track electric carline connecting it with the city of Union, eighteen miles away. Its Main Street was a typical New England Main Street—elm-shaded, bordered on each side by a gravel sidewalk, becoming brick when it passed the single brick business block on the left, and concrete with big cracks in it when it straggled up over the knoll in front of Masonic Hall. There was the usual collection of public buildings on Main Street, with the usual sprinkling of A-roofed dwelling-houses in between. There was the customary town-hall painted ginger-snap brown, the syndicate drugstore, glaringly up-to-date with plate-glass windows and modern yellow signs.



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There was the usual over-supply of churches, and the several garages made over from old blacksmith shops, with red pumps out in front bearing placards announcing in amateurish lettering the price of gasoline. A little out of the town, there was the railroad station called "the depot," built of wood, painted dirty gray, by which express-trains whizzed at a terrific speed with merely a shrill whistle in way of recognition. There was a river, too; so of course there were mills in Ridgefield.

This morning Reba hurried past the mills, across the river, along Main Street, by the last church on Main Street, by the last garage, by the granite post that marked the town-line at last, out into the open country. She had no plan, no destination in mind when she set out. She simply wanted to get away from familiar sights and sounds, from houses, from eyes. She was surprised to discover she had walked so far when she saw in the distance before her the granite posts of the cemetery gate. The cemetery was at least two miles from the town-hall. Not until she saw the posts did it occur to Reba to enter the quiet white city of the dead, where no one stared and no one criticized.

It was here that Reba's grandfather lay buried. Often on Memorial Days she had visited his lot. It had never meant anything more to her than the place where she would lie herself sometime. No one had ever talked to her a great deal about her Grandfather Jerome. The members of the household in which she had grown up were chary of paying tributes of praise to anybody—dead or alive. The monument, which Reba's grandfather himself had erected before



he died, had been to Reba simply a high shaft of granite. It had never had any special connection with her, until to-day, when with difficulty she slowly approached it over the slippery crust of the snow.

She saw it a long way off, rising lofty and triumphant before her. The severe New England winter had succeeded in obliterating completely most of the other stones, and the few whose tops did appear had a huddled, shrinking look, like sheep in a snowstorm. All but the girl's grandfather's proud shaft of granite, the winter had disregarded. Reba, standing small and wind-blown before it, felt something of her grandfather's indomitable spirit, as she gazed up and saw his name rearing itself up boldly above all the other snow-conquered inscriptions, chiseled clearly against the pale blue of the winter-morning sky. For the first time in her life she felt pride in her inheritance. The vision of her pioneer grandfather had suddenly jostled her out of her smug belief in passive righteousness.

She was all alone in the cemetery—all alone with his monument. Suddenly she pulled off her glove, leaned, and laid her small bare hand against the cold surface of the granite. "His blood running warm right here in my fingers!" she exclaimed to herself, and a second after, the whistle of the distant mills, which her grandfather had put the energy of his red blood into, boomed out the noon hour!

It was as if he spoke to Reba, and she, gazing away off toward the horizon, replied outloud, "I believe Cousin Pattie's right," and again a moment later, "I believe Cousin Pattie's right!"

It was there in the cemetery, among all the dead people buried underneath the snow, that, out of its



darkness and confinement, Reba's soul was born anew—a small flickering little thing at first, wavering between light and darkness for days after its first moment of self-realization, but a spark of life, small and weak as it was, that persisted in existence and cried out night and day for nurture and tender ministrations.

Reba's mother and aunts observed nothing out of the ordinary in the girl as she helped them that day clear up after dinner. There was no trace visible of her experience as she walked back and forth, from refrigerator to stove, from stove to table, over the well-worn path which her feet had traveled for so many years, and afterward took her sewing and sat down in her mother's bedroom by the western window. Her fingers threaded the needle, knotted the thread, made the long, even rows of stitches as usual, but her thoughts were darting here and there—zigzag, like a frightened domesticated canary who had chanced to hop out of his cage into the mystifying space of out-of-doors.

She was assailed with doubts, tortured with misgivings, time and time again during the days that followed. In fact, her state of mind was like the tide, fluctuating between low, dark periods of doubt, and high, bright ones of conviction. But it was like an incoming tide, and every new wave of assurance came a little nearer to her old ideals, built upon the shore, and destroyed them at last, making of the old fortress, where she had found comfort and shelter for years, a shapeless mound of resistless sand at last, which she grieved and mourned over as something loved and lost.

She had no plan, no program of escape. She groped



blindly. She wished she could feel the pressure of a specific ambition, like Cousin Pattie; or the driving incentive of some visible goal. What she was hungry for, what she desired was of such intangible quality! Steam-power and electric, even one's two feet, could bring Cousin Pattie nearer to lavender Austria, green Italy or lemon-colored China, but there were no railroads—no tickets issued—for the regions Reba would explore. With large sums of money, and extensive additions made of redbrick and white mortar, Reba's grandfather could realize his great desire, but Reba's was not to be bought, or lured by ambitious quarters. It was hardly to be put into words. She couldn't have told herself what the thing was which she desired.

If only Cousin Pattie hadn't gone to San Domingo, she might have joined her. If only she were not quite so old, she might apply at a boarding-school and assume the rôle of a young girl. If only—if only——Thus her meditations always began, and might have continued to begin, *ad infinitum*, if Cousin Pattie's postcard hadn't arrived, mailed from a port Reba had never heard of. It had only three words on it, but they were written clearly, underlined blackly, and enclosed by quotation marks. "In spite of," were the words. Reba flushed at sight of them.

A few days later, when there blew onto the floor in the very path of her broom, when she was sweeping her father's "study," a small paper folder, the spirit of Cousin Pattie's postcard message was burned deep into her heart. It was a folder from an organization to which her father had for many years sent small contributions.

Reba was familiar with its name. The Women's



New England Alliance was well known. But not until she picked up the folder did Reba know exactly what its work was. It was located in Boston, and offered social advantages, and opportunities for mental improvement, to women living away from home. It endeavored to fill the place of that home—provided pleasant shelter, wholesome food, social attractions. It was a kind of working girls' or business-women's club, with an initiation fee of one dollar, and yearly dues of fifty cents. It wasn't limited to working women. Any girl or woman could join.

Reba leaned her broom in a corner of the room and sat down with her bit of paper, on the edge of a chair, and read more.

There were evening classes, it seemed, offered by the Alliance to its members for a small fee, in millinery, manicuring and nursing; in current events and history; in swimming and gymnastics; in etiquette and dancing. There were weekly talks on recent fiction, the theatre and music. Every Saturday evening there was a home entertainment in the parlors of the Alliance's headquarters, to promote friendliness among the members. Every Sunday there were prayer-meetings and Bible classes.

Reba had never been to Boston unaccompanied. She had never spent a night away from Ridgefield without one of her aunts. But it flashed across her that they might trust her for a little while to the care of an organization sanctioned by her father's support. What if they should grant her their permission? What if she had only to ask? Lessons in swimming and gymnastics! Lessons in etiquette and dancing! Every Saturday an entertainment to promote friendliness!



The very next morning, surreptitiously Reba wrote a very careful little note on her light-blue note-paper, with the gold filigreed J in one corner, to inquire if there was a single room she could occupy for a few weeks during February or March. And after she mailed this small, sealed blue bomb at the Ridgefield post-office, she approached the little brick temple of the Ridgefield Trust Company and, with pounding heart, and knees that trembled, entered it.

Reba knew that she had some money of her own, somewhere. Ever since she had become of legal age, her father had been in the habit of bringing her papers to sign occasionally, which she always did, without annoying him with questions. It irritated him to be questioned. Besides, she had all the spending-money she needed, which he gave to her gruffly whenever she asked for it, which wasn't often. Money had been of little use to Reba in her pursuit of self-abnegation.

She was painfully ill at ease when at last she found herself facing Mr. James Perkins, the president of the Ridgefield Trust Company, and one of the members of the Standing Committee at the Congregational Church.

"How do you do?" she murmured primly.

"How-do-you-do, how-do-you-do, how-do-you-do," Mr. Perkins replied effusively three times, and shoved up a chair and asked her to be seated.

Reba accepted the extreme edge of the chair, and somehow got out the explanation of her call at last. She thought perhaps she ought to know—being over eighteen, and all that—if there was money of hers down here at the bank, and in case she should ever



want to draw out a little—or anything like that—just how one did such things.

Mr. Perkins gave a loud laugh and slapped one of his well-stuffed pepper-and-salt trouser-legs, just above the knee, then stood up. "Come with me, come with me," he said in a deep voice, his eyes twinkling mysteriously. "Come with me."

Reba rose, and followed Mr. Perkins across the hall, then down a winding iron staircase, through some grilled gates, into a tiny, crypt-like space, electric-lighted, underground somewhere. Its walls appeared to be made of steel—metal of some kind, anyhow—and were peppered with numbers and key-holes. Mr. Perkins stood up on tiptoe and tapped two of the numbers with his keyring.

"Bulging, bulging, bulging," he announced. "And your father says you'll need another box pretty soon, he's afraid. All yours, all yours, all yours, Miss Jerome. First mortgage bonds, every one of 'em, so I understand," he went on, enigmatically to Reba, "four and five per cent. first mortgage bonds. Nothing risky, nothing risky, nothing risky, Miss Jerome."

Reba stared at the little numbers.

"And if I should ever want a little of what's up there?" she asked.

"Oh my, oh my, oh my! No need to disturb those," replied Mr. Perkins, in his big-voice way. "No need at all—not with a deposit in your own name of something over \$20,000 up above," he motioned ceiling-ward. "Just make out a check, just make out a check, just sit down and make out a check, Miss Jerome."

"I see," replied Reba. She showed no surprise over her deposit. She felt none. Sums of money exceed-



ing amounts which she was accustomed to were vague and unreckonable. "Thank you very much," she went on politely to Mr. Perkins, as they moved out toward the daylight streaming down the winding stairway; and then, just as she started to ascend, "I suppose you would be willing to help me make out a check," she faltered, "if I should ever need to."

"Certainly, certainly, certainly! But there's your father, you know,—your own father, Miss Jerome."

"Oh, would you mind not telling my father just yet—that I—that I've been here?" she pleaded.

"Later, of course, but not *now*—not *just* now," she floundered, blushing deeply at the realization that she was stooping to actual deceit. "Oh, I don't know what you can think of me," she broke off. She had sat before Mr. Perkins before she joined the church. "It was mostly from curiosity. Cousin Pattie said that I—that my grandfather—I thought I *ought* to know at least—it seemed to me——"

Mr. Perkins' big, soft hand suddenly reached out and patted Reba's shoulder. "You come to me any time you want to, Miss Jerome," he said. "Any time you want to. I won't tell tales out of school."



## CHAPTER VII

THE answer to Reba's little blue note was unfortunate in its arrival. For three days she haunted the post-office, morning and evening, to avoid the possibility of its falling into anybody's hands but her own, and then, on the crucial afternoon, Aunt Augusta announced that it was too stormy for Reba to stir out! David could bring the mail home with him, as usual, when he came at six o'clock, if there was any. Reba was wary enough to make no inquiries of her father when he came in, and it wasn't until she had begun on her preserved peach, and David, who had been eating swiftly and silently as usual, at his end of the table, had shoved back his chair, preliminary to leaving the room, that the important missive was tossed before her.

"What's that mean?" he asked briefly.

The letter had been opened! That did not surprise Reba. What brought the color to her face, and made her suddenly choke over the piece of peach she was trying to swallow, was the shock of her unpreparedness. She had planned to submit her scheme to them gently, one by one, and in the spirit of a petitioner—not like this! Still coughing, she reached for the letter, but Aunt Augusta was quicker, and snatched it up first.

"What is it, anyhow?" she remarked, unsuspectingly. "Humph!" she scorned, as her eye fell upon the printed name-head in the corner of the govern-

ment-envelope. "Begging more money, I suppose. Got hold of Reba's name somehow." Then she drew out the typewritten sheet inside. These were the mystifying words that met her eyes. She read them to herself.

DEAR MISS JEROME:

In answer to your inquiry of January 25th, a single room will be available on February the 7th, and we shall be very glad to welcome you here. We enclose our price-list of rooms, including board, also a circular describing our rules and regulations. As there is a great demand for rooms, please let us know your decision immediately.

It was necessary for Aunt Augusta to read this communication through three times, before it conveyed any meaning whatsoever, examine the circulars, inspect the address, and then read the incomprehensible words over again. Even then she was not sure.

"Will you explain that?" she said to Reba, passing the letter back to the girl through Aunt Emma, who handled it meagerly, as if it were something that was likely to explode.

Reba's hand trembled as she received the thin sheet. She stared at it a long while, not knowing what to reply.

"Well?" prodded Aunt Augusta.

"Why, I thought I'd like——" Reba started out, without raising her eyes. "It's the Women's New England Alliance—— I thought—— Father gives to it—and I——"

"Do you mean to say you actually *did* write and ask about rooms?"

"Yes, I did—I——"



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"You wrote on your own hook? You actually sat down, without a word to *me*, or to your *mother*, or to your *father*, and asked about single rooms off there in Boston—about single rooms for *yourself*, to occupy *alone*,—is that what you did?"

"Well, I——"

Aunt Augusta jerked down her glasses. "Have you lost your mind, Rebecca Jerome?" she demanded.

Reba made no reply. She just sat there with stooped shoulders, as if she had been caught in a sudden hailstorm miles away from shelter, and attempted no defense.

"You didn't ask permission because you knew you wouldn't get it," went on Aunt Augusta, "and that's next door to disobedience—that's what it is, and what's more, it's deceitful—sly and deceitful—and you a member of the church! I don't know what came over you. Pass that letter here." Reba obeyed. "There! There!" Aunt Augusta exclaimed, as she ripped the thin page twice in two, "I'll settle *that*. You write those people that you won't need that room, after all. Understand? And you write 'em *to-night*, and bring me the answer before you go to bed. You must be crazy, thinking you can go gallivanting off to Boston without a chaperon. Stark crazy!"

Reba's father had stepped noiselessly out of the room. Her mother's cheeks were flushed, and her eyes bright, as usual whenever a little excitement made her forget herself. Aunt Emma, too, had an alert and interested expression. Reba took in all these details as she raised her eyes an instant in one tremulous glance. No one to defend her! She pushed back her chair and rose. She couldn't help with the dishes

to-night! Many more breaths of this unfriendly atmosphere, and she would choke. There was a painful pressure in her throat, too, that warned her. Sensational as a sudden exit would be, it was preferable to losing control, here. She crossed the room rapidly, with a heaving chest.

Her rush upstairs was a race between flying feet and sobs that pulled and strained—a tie race, for when at last she reached her bed, and threw herself forward headlong upon it, the violent sobs at the same instant burst forth, one after another—pell-mell—racking, rending, tearing their way through the cultivated, trimmed little paths of the girl's soul—paths which she had taken such pains to lay out and tend—all her pretty self-control trampled and crushed by this sudden fury that shook her from head to foot, possessed her body and soul, made of her just a mindless, will-less thing, crumpled up upon the bed—a thing that, after the first passion had passed, jerked spasmodically at measured intervals and moaned, "Oh, oh, oh!"

For a long time Reba lay there, utterly abandoned, face buried in the pillow, making no attempt whatsoever to recover her composure. The elements had their way for once with her. The storm died down only when it had spent itself. It must have been an hour, at least, before Reba was calm again.

When finally she got up, she groped her way across the room to her bureau, lit the light, and stood staring at her red eyes and disheveled appearance, wonderingly, in the mirror. She had never been gripped and shaken by her feelings before. She was awed and impressed by the experience. She didn't know



that it was in her, to cry like that. Could she laugh with such abandon too? Could she defy with such passion, once aroused? What if she should go downstairs to Aunt Augusta now and proclaim her independence? What if she should *dare*? Her eyes grew big with astonishment as she contemplated the monstrousness of such an act! She didn't do it—it didn't seem quite possible yet, but she didn't sit down and write the letter Aunt Augusta had distinctly told her to write! That didn't seem quite possible either, with her eyes still red, and her breast still heaving from her passionate outcry against the ignominy of her position.

She undressed slowly and crawled into bed, lying awake for a long time, quivering with suspense, dreading the moment of Aunt Augusta's approach. It was Aunt Emma, however, who finally appeared on the threshold, explaining that she had been sent to fetch that letter. Reba spoke tremblingly from her pillow.

"My head ached a little," she said. "Tell Aunt Augusta that I'll write it in the morning."

Aunt Augusta would not speak to Reba in the morning. Even Aunt Emma's and the invalid's greetings were mere grunts. She was not allowed to help with the preparation of breakfast—briefly told please to keep out of the kitchen this morning, and the twenty minutes at the table, over the eggs, baked potatoes, doughnuts and coffee, were ominously silent. Afterward, when she approached the dishpan placed in the kitchen sink, preparatory to washing the dishes, as usual, Aunt Augusta snatched the dishcloth out of her hands and shoved her out of her place.

"When that letter's written will be time enough for your assistance," she snapped.

Reba turned her back, went up to her room, and remained there all the morning, embroidering on a centerpiece, keeping her fingers busy with filling in the petals of a large rose with various shades of pink silk, concentrating her eyes and fingers on the six-inch white linen circle, bound tightly over embroidery hoops, while her thoughts ran far and wide, and her tumultuous feelings circled large areas. At noon her mind was made up. Only in defiance lay self-respect. She must prove now the stuff she was made of, or forever after hang her head before her grandfather's proud shaft of granite. It was while her cheeks were still hot with her resolve that Reba wrote to the Women's New England Alliance and told them she would take the room. She ran out and mailed the letter before dinner that noon.

After supper that same night, Aunt Augusta, who had been waiting all day for some sign of surrender from Reba, patience and curiosity tried to the point of exhaustion, inquired briefly, abruptly, "What about that letter?"

Reba had come into her mother's room for her work-bag which always hung on a certain door-knob there. She was on her way out, when her aunt's question hit her square in the chest.

"Why—why—*what* letter?" she stammered, trying to prepare herself for the conflict.

"You know well enough."

Reba fumbled with a ribbon-bow on her work-bag, eyes upon it, and backed up against the door-casing for support.



"I don't see what harm it can do me to go to Boston for a little while," she parried. "I want your approval, of course, but I'm twenty-five—and——"

"Haven't you answered that letter yet?" cut in Aunt Augusta crisply.

"Yes, I've answered it."

"Oh, you have!" Relief was obvious in Aunt Augusta's voice. "Why didn't you say so?"

"I've told them I'd take the room," Reba murmured. Only the clock replied for ten seconds or so.

"You told them *what?*" Aunt Augusta gasped.

"I told them I'd take the room," Reba replied more clearly, and suddenly she raised her eyes, and, for the first time in her life, squarely met the stare of the monsters peering at her over the rims of Aunt Augusta's glasses. She drew in her breath deep. "I'm going to Boston," she announced. "I'm going to Boston if it kills me," she repeated in a low voice; and David, from his hiding-place in the adjoining dining-room, was surprised to catch a look about the girl with her head thrown up like that, and her eyes steely and hard, that reminded him of the crayon of his father at the age of nineteen, hanging upstairs in the spare-chamber.

It had been warfare before, but after Reba's announcement it was proclaimed warfare, and Aunt Augusta bent every nerve, resorted to any measure, any device, legitimate or otherwise, that might help to stamp out this astonishing menace to her power. She appealed to the girl's ineffectual father; suggested financial obstructions; went so far as to attempt to cancel the room at the Alliance; urged the minister at the church to point out to the erring girl the wick-



edness of her persistence. But in spite of everything, Reba dragged down her little humpbacked trunk from the third floor, and grimly set about putting her things into it. The same determination that she had practiced for so many years in her pursuit of resignation stood stanchly by her in her new quest. Timid and fearful as she was by nature, she was strong in her capacity for suffering for what she believed to be right.

And she did suffer. Many a time, during the fortnight that preceded Reba's departure, her heart was near the breaking-point. She could not have borne many more days of contest. She longed for one kind word—one kind look before she left the old familiar scenes. She passionately desired the good omen of one God-be-with-you-till-we-meet-again. But she didn't have it. Even on that last night, when she sought one little expression of goodwill from her own mother, she was refused it.

She had approached her mother's wheel-chair timidly, hopefully. They were alone in the room.

"I'm going away to-morrow, Mother," she had murmured. "Won't you say good-by?"

Her mother had replied accusingly: "If I were well and *you* were sick, I'd do anything I could not to make *you* more miserable. You're a selfish girl, I'm afraid, Reba."

The only comfort Reba had during those last days at home was her father's non-committal silence. He expressed himself neither on one side nor the other, but somehow Reba felt that he was not displeased with her—wholly. He was as gruff as ever, and showed no disposition to stand behind her in her single-handed



struggle, but he did ask her how much money she would like, and went so far on the day of her departure as to drive her down to the station himself.

It was when the train that was to bear her away on her new pilgrimage of self-expression drew puffing up beside the Ridgefield station, and Reba wondered whether it was the vibration of the platform made by the approaching monster or her knees trembling with her misgivings, that her father suddenly exclaimed:

“Well, well, I guess you’re really off! I didn’t suppose you’d have the spunk. No, when it came right down to it, I didn’t suppose you’d have the spunk, Reba!”

## CHAPTER VIII

**I**T was five o'clock on a Saturday afternoon in late March. In a certain little oblong room, so narrow that the bed could be placed only horizontal to the long dimension, beside a window that looked out over a range of roofs, and a forest of chimneys, water-tanks, sky-lights and escape-pipes of one kind or another, Rebecca Jerome sat on the edge of a straight-backed bedroom chair, and sewed—nervously, eagerly, glancing out at the great face of a clock on a building opposite, every now and then, and making her stitches longer and bolder as the time gained on her.

She was shortening her white muslin dress. Mamie Blake, who roomed next door, had told her the evening before, when she had tried the dress on in preparation for Saturday's entertainment, that the length was what ailed it most; and Mamie had pinned up five inches of it in two deep tucks, above the flounce of ruffles. Reba hadn't had a chance to finish the alteration until after lunch to-day. Her gymnasium class met Friday evenings, and Saturday mornings her course in domestic science kept her busy until twelve; and always the noon-hour was claimed by instruction in modern dancing—especially essential to-day, Reba felt, in view of the nature of the evening's entertainment.

Reba's heart hammered at the thought of that entertainment, so close at hand now. She had been away from Ridgefield only a little over seven weeks, and



here she was getting ready for a dancing-party—a dancing-party with young men! Reba had never danced with a young man! Her stitches were disgraceful! They would have distressed Aunt Augusta. They troubled even Reba; but it was after five, and the party began at half-past seven.

The little room Reba was sitting in, although in shape and size and furnishings the exact replica of a dozen or so other little rooms, in the long row of which it was one, had absorbed, during the seven weeks that Reba had been its occupant, much of the atmosphere of her room at home. There was the same neatness, the same perfection about the erect pillow and wrinkleless bedspread. On top of the little humpbacked trunk back of the door appeared the fringed afghan which Reba's mother had crocheted twenty years ago, folded squarely. One of Reba's round, hand-crocheted washcloths was hanging to dry, in correct and sanitary position, on a small hook on the side of the commode, and, just as she had always been taught to arrange clean towels, like crossed hands on top of the water-pitcher at home, so they were placed here. The top of the oak chiffonier had a chaste look, like an altar—no array of bottles, cosmetics, cold-cream jars, powder-cans, or powder-puffs. A large, tightly-stuffed, red-satin pin-cushion, square with a white "tidy" on it, was in the center, and on either side an empty, white-frosted cologne bottle, decorated with red stripes. And back of the cushion appeared a picture of Christ, framed in brown plush with a moss rose painted in oils on the plush. On the little wobbly oblong table beside the chiffonier,



lay Reba's Bible, half-way up in one of the two neat pyramids of books.

"Make an excuse and worm yourself into that queer little Miss Jerome's room sometime," Miss Bartholomew, the gymnasium instructor, had one day laughingly told Miss Park, who held the position of Social Secretary at the Women's Alliance. "It's like stepping into a corner of your dear little old grandmother's room, 'way off in some little quiet, tucked-away New England village. I'd love to see the house she stepped out of."

"I wish I could make her out," Miss Park replied, with a sigh. "She puzzles me. No job, and here now for over six weeks."

"I know," agreed Miss Bartholomew. "You wouldn't think a little prim old maid like that would care about drills and athletic stunts, but she hasn't missed an evening. At first I couldn't get her elbows away from her sides. She was held in and restrained all over. I had to teach her even how to run. It's amusing to watch her on the track, going at it so earnestly for a solid half-hour after class, and appealing to me every few minutes to know if it's right. And really, in the tank she's little less than a martyr—petrified by water, really, I believe, but determined to overcome her fright. The first time I made her jump off the diving-board, she looked a veritable Joan of Arc at the stake. But she jumped!"

"It's the same with dancing," took up Miss Park. "She has been as determined to master the art as if there were a degree attached to it. She has joined Ida's folk-dancing class too. At first I thought the poor little thing must be in poor health, and that a



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doctor had prescribed persistent exercise. But that doesn't explain her interest in all the other courses she is taking too. She's taking practically all of them, you know."

It was true Reba was taking all the courses which her schedule would allow. It was a thrilling experience to her to be one of a class of a certain number of individuals, who met together periodically. The joy of feeling herself included, naturally and with no effort, in various little groups, was something she had never known before. It gave her a strange deep feeling of pleasure just to answer, "Here," to her name as it was read off from a list of others.

It was all so different from what she had prepared herself for. She had come steeled for rebukes, armored for all the old tortures she had endured at the summer hotels—being left out, ignored, avoided, smarting with the conspicuousness of her isolation; and instead people moved over and made a place for her when she entered her various classes, received her as a matter of course, even nodded to her, and smiled occasionally.

She had chosen wisely. For a super-sensitive nature such as hers there didn't exist an organization better suited to receive her. The heterogeneity of the members of the Women's Alliance concealed any *one* individual's peculiarities. There were all kinds and descriptions of women in Reba's classes—young girls, who chewed gum and had to be asked to stop; married women with gray hair, who came in from the suburbs; clerks; stenographers; shop-girls of fourteen; school-teachers of forty. Reba was just one of



a dozen or so different types in groups made up of dissimilar elements.

Of course at first she felt shy, awkward, shrank from asking questions; but Miss Park—a wonderful, goddess-like creature, whose particular gift seemed to be discovering the girl or woman whom she might help somehow or other—had taken Reba in charge by her second day at the Alliance, and made everything clear and understandable. All Reba's apprehensions as to the good taste of joining certain classes—dancing, for instance, at her time of life—were not as much as recognized by Miss Park, laughed, pooh-poohed away.

It was one of the sweet surprises of her life that the tortures she had so dreaded were spared her. The city itself seemed inclined toward kindness, she thought. It didn't frighten her. She liked the sound of it at night from her high bedroom window, which, after she had put out the light, she would open and sit beside in her warm wool kimona. The sound of the city at night was like the cheerful hum of the mills, Reba thought, only bigger, deeper, significant of greater vitality. She took the same shy pleasure in listening to it, in gazing at its mysterious lights and flashing electric signs, glimpses of which she could see from her window, as in watching the activities of the mills at home. More—for she was part of the city. She smiled to think that if she clapped her hands, or spoke outloud, the little sound she made would become part of the great ocean-like drone.

Of course Reba had been to the city before, but as an alien—unsympathetically. Several times she and Aunt Augusta had spent a night in Boston on their



way to one of the summer resorts. But the city to Aunt Augusta was a dangerous place, full of robbers, horrible traffic catastrophes, fires, germs and filth. Aunt Augusta always clutched her shopping-bag in Boston as if she expected it to be snatched from her grasp at every corner, and lay awake half the night between her hotel sheets (washed no doubt, in the same tub with hundreds of others) sniffing for smoke and wondering if she could possibly descend the skeleton-like fire-escape outside the window at the end of the hall. She suspected everybody in the city, from hotel-managers to ribbon-clerks, of cheating her, or trying to, if she gave them half a chance, and she always drew a sigh of relief when she had escaped in safety from the perilous place.

But Reba delighted in mingling in the city crowds. It gave her secret pleasure just to be convoyed across a crowded thoroughfare by a big, bluff policeman, as if she were one of a thousand equally precious logs to be safely guided around the curve of a river. Nobody observed her, or selected her to stare at, in the city. She found herself taken for granted by the busy crowds, and she thrived, as the timidest of garden flowers will thrive quietly under the impartial sun.

It amazed Reba that it was possible for her to be so happy in her adventure, when so much disfavor was hanging over her. For she well knew that she was still unforgiven by her mother and aunts. In answer to her weekly letters to them she hadn't received a reply of any sort. But she *was* happy! She was fairly intoxicated sometimes! The folk-dances affected her so—clapping hands with a partner, romping and skipping at her side, nodding at her—that she



could hardly keep the tears out of her eyes. She had always looked on before. Now, *now* she was in the game herself. It made her tingle all over. What if—oh, what if—by working diligently, trying hard—the very hardest she knew how—she might lure back her vanishing youth, just for a little while!

She expected no intimacies, and the night that Mamie Blake had abruptly burst in upon her with an unceremonious, "Say, hook me, will you? Gosh, but I'm late," it seemed to Reba as if her cup were running over with good things. She was not accustomed to such spontaneous expressions of friendliness from next-door neighbors.

Eagerly her fingers had fastened what few hooks and eyes corresponded on the back of Mamie's dress, over a mass of coarse and rather grimy lace underneath. Mamie worked in a downtown five-and-ten-cent store. She was not very refined. She used "darn it," and "damn" about as much as she did "gosh," but that did not cloud Reba's joy at being burst in upon by her.

"You're a lamb!" Mamie had exclaimed, when Reba had finished with the hooks. "Thanks. Say, you'll find some molasses-kisses in my top drawer. Help yourself." Then abruptly, "You couldn't lend me an umbrella, could you? I'm out of one, and *look* at it!" The rain was beating hard against the window-pane.

"Why, of *course* I can!" replied Reba ardently.

She went into her closet. Her two umbrellas—the cheap cotton one, and the silk, with the carved ivory handle, were hanging side by side on two hooks. She took down the one with the carved ivory handle, and



came out with it. She had never lent anything to a friend before!

"Here it is," she said, shiningly.

Mamie grabbed it without a glance. "Thanks. Well, I'm off. I got to meet my 'friend' up at the Gayety at eight sharp. Movies. Top bureau drawer. Don't forget." And down the hall she clattered, while Reba, quivering and exalted, softly closed the door.

Reba had not planned to go to the entertainment to-night. She had no wish to put her good fortune to too severe a test. She hesitated to expose herself to obvious disappointments. The nature of the entertainment had been explained some two weeks before, and it had frightened her.

The Women's Alliance, it seemed, had issued an invitation to a similar organization of young men in the city, asking its members to a "party with dancing" on a certain Saturday night, in late March. They had accepted, and Miss Park, in addressing the girls *en masse* one evening, had asked all those who wanted to come to the party to put their names on a paper that she had posted on the bulletin-board.

During the dancing-hour one noon Miss Park had said to Reba, as she guided her over the floor in a one-step, "You're doing so well! You'll be all ready for Saturday, won't you?"

"Oh, but I'm not going. I didn't put down my name," blushed Reba.

"But why not? You must. Of course you must."

"I don't dance well enough yet."

"Of course you do. Lots better than many. We need you, too. We want to have the number of girls

and men as even as possible, and we've lots more men now. I'm going to put your name down myself."

And she did. Reba found it there that same evening. She didn't cross it out, and when she went to bed that night she lay awake a long while in the dark, from sheer anxiety.

"I'm going to dance with a young man!" she whispered. "Just think, Rebecca Jerome,—just think!"

And "just thinking" she had almost forgotten to say her prayers.

As she stood before her mirror on the momentous evening, and gazed at herself in her shortened white muslin, she wasn't very well satisfied.

"I'm afraid I look just what I am," she sighed—"an old maid! I know I do! I *wish* I knew how to do my hair." (It was crimped, and pompadoured over an artificial foundation, and in the back it was rolled into a tiny tight wad, held firmly by long wire hairpins.) "I wish—I *wish*," she went on, "that I had short sleeves!" Aunt Augusta had always maintained that bare forearms suggested dish-washing to *her*. "And I feel sure that these ruffles over the shoulders are out of date. Oh, I *wish*——" A wave of self-consciousness swept over her. She had just been hooking Mamie into a Nile-green chiffon, low-necked—very low-necked—she had had to pin it up behind to the firm foundation of Mamie's corsets. Reba's white muslin fastened up to the tight roll of hair at the back of her neck. "I don't believe I'll go down. Nobody'll miss me. I may be dressed differently from anybody else there." She stood uncertainly by the door with her hand upon the knob. Then, "Coward,"



she whispered, and if Miss Bartholomew had been there she would have seen the same Joan-of-Arc expression on Reba's face that she had worn when she had jumped off the diving-board, as she opened the door and went out into the hall.

She felt reassured the moment she got downstairs. There seemed to be little uniformity of costume. Miss Park, her idol, Miss Katherine Park herself, was in simple white net. Some of the young ladies wore shirt-waists and dark skirts.

The young men had already arrived. A large dark phalanx of them occupied one corner of the Assembly-hall. Miss Park was on the platform, when Reba entered, greeting the assembly in that full vibrant voice of hers. She was smiling and flushed, perfectly poised. After her pretty "good evening" she explained the course of procedure for obtaining partners.

Upon entering the hall everybody had been presented with a colored piece of card-board with a number on it. (Reba had hers safe in her hand—a red 33.) There were four colors—yellow, green, red, and blue, and two numbers of each color. The two people whose cards corresponded in color and number were partners. To facilitate matters, all those with red cards were asked to go to that corner of the room in which had been hung a red streamer; all those with green cards, to the corner of the room with the green streamer, and so on. After everybody had found his or her partner, then Miss Park would announce in what order the four groups might dance. The hall was too small to accommodate everybody at once.

"Now," she finished, "please all go to your proper corners, and find your partners."



There followed a general intermingling. Reba started for the red streamer which was hanging diagonally across the hall from her. She threaded her way around the edge, passing through the green territory, and the yellow, on the way. Everybody was talking and laughing, eager and interested. She saw several of the yellow partners discover each other as she passed along. She saw one girl—a dark, big-eyed, bright-cheeked creature (she knew her by sight. Lollie Terrence, they called her. She could dance on the tip end of her toes in gymnasium shoes)—she saw Lollie back up to one of the large wall-radiators and, giggling, slip her number behind it.

“It will mix things up, Lollie,” warned the girl that was with her.

“I don’t care. If you could have seen him, my dear! Gee! I’m going to streak it, till this funny business is over.” She shrugged, and flashed out of one of the doors.

Reba went on her way. She approached the red group a little anxiously. There was no need of her knees wabbling like that, of course. He wouldn’t eat her up. Oh, but she *must* do well! She must remember to keep her left hand light, to be ready to turn, to slide, to dip at any moment, to keep high on her toes, so as to be better able to follow wherever he wanted to lead, just at the instant he indicated. Where was he, she wondered—the man to whom fate had allotted her for this first real dance of hers. How strange to feel oneself hunted for by a man, like this, and to be hunting for a man yourself! Perhaps it would be better form, Reba thought, to sit down in



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one of the chairs up against the wall, and wait until she was found. She approached them.

Suddenly one of the Alliance's hostesses tapped on something.

"Listen, Reds, a moment please," she said, in a hurried, business-like voice. "Will all the girls in this group with a number over twenty-seven, please go over in front of the platform. We have more girls than men here to-night, and all reds over number twenty-seven will be given girls for partners, just as soon as we can get at it."

Reba glanced down at her thirty-three. Until that moment she hadn't realized how much she had been counting on this golden opportunity. She had drawn a luckless number! A *girl* for a partner! Why, she danced with girls every noon! A girl! How cruel! She sank down in one of the empty chairs behind her. And just chance too, she protested—no fault of hers.

Two months before, Reba would have dumbly accepted the unfortunate circumstance as inevitable. But the new spirit within her rebelled, groped for a way out. What was there to do? Was there anything? Was there any way to change the number? Abruptly, Lollie Terrence and the discarded yellow card back of the radiator flashed across her mind. Dared she? "You must find the roundabout ways to the thing you want," Cousin Pattie had said. "In spite of," was Cousin Pattie's motto. There was time enough. Nobody had seen her number. Nobody would know. What wouldn't suit Lollie might be very acceptable to her. Reba crushed the useless "thirty-three" inside her pink sash, got up, and threaded her way around the edge of the hall again.

She would! She could! It was perfectly honest—perfectly fair. She approached the radiator with that new expression of defiance on her face, stooped abruptly, groped in the dust, and drew forth a smudgy yellow four.

Miss Bartholomew had charge of the yellow group.

"Hello," she said kindly to Reba, who was all a-flush now, and somewhat excited. "Do you belong here? What is your number? Four? Oh, yes. He's over there by the door. Sixteen?" she went on, turning to somebody else. "Sixteen? Saw him a second ago by that chair."



## CHAPTER IX

NUMBER FOUR" was standing by himself, up against the wall, withdrawn from the group of eager partner-searchers. He was tall, and lank—a big-proportioned fellow. His long arms were hanging straight down by his sides in a kind of helpless fashion. His shoulders were stooped, and his chin thrust forward in the way overgrown boys have sometimes when they try to appear less conspicuous.

All Reba saw at first was the yellow four pinned on the lapel of his coat, but the discerning Lollie Terrence had taken in, in a single glance, every inch of the yellow-ticketed six feet of laughable ungainliness. The cheap suit of clothes, made out of loosely woven homespun material, shapeless as burlap and not unlike it in color, the long red wrists hanging out of sleeves ridiculously too short, and the side-splitting bit of wrinkled white sock, showing above a clumsy boot-top, had not escaped Lollie. Nor the shock of thick, sand-colored hair either, nor the crimson face beneath it. Reba missed all these details as she timidly approached her partner. Ought she to speak first, she wondered? She waited a second or two. It appeared she would have to, for "Number four" made no move to address her as she hovered close a minute.

"Excuse me," she began, turning toward him abruptly, and trying to keep her voice steady. (She had never spoken to an entire stranger in this manner



before. Would it not have been better to have waited until Miss Bartholomew came and introduced them? Well, it was too late now.) "Excuse me," she went on, "but are you number four?"

He stared down at her a moment in silence, as if to make sure that he had been addressed. Then, "Did you speak to me, Miss?" he inquired.

"Yes," nodded Reba, "I did. Are you number four?"

"Yes, ma'am," he replied politely. "Yes, miss."

"Well, then," Reba simply had to take the initiative. *He* would not. "I guess we're partners."

"How's that?"

"Why, don't you see? I'm four, and you're four too. We match." And, flushing, Reba held up her number to him as proof.

He glanced at it, then down at his own yellow four, on the lapel of his coat, then back at Reba's again.

"That's so," he said, as if it were a phenomenon he couldn't quite fathom. "That's so." Then he looked at Reba, standing all white and ruffled before him—stared at her frankly a second or two in silence. "That's so. We're partners, I guess," he reiterated, and gave a nervous laugh.

"I guess so," said Reba, and gave a nervous laugh too.

There seemed to be nothing more for her to say, and she stood there, waiting for him to speak—it was his turn. But he didn't say a word! Reba stole a desperate glance at him, at last; and then she saw—she saw his torturing discomfort. His face was very red, and there were beads of perspiration on his forehead. He was embarrassed! The slow realization



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of his ill-at-easeness steadied Reba. *She understood. She knew.*

"Let's sit down the way some of the others are doing," she suggested.

"I'd like to," he replied.

"Here are two chairs," said Reba, and she led the way to two empty places.

As "Number four" folded up to sit down in the chair beside Reba, he was very careful not to allow his rough coat to as much as brush one of her snowy ruffles. Afterward he produced a brand new handkerchief—white, with a dark blue polka-dotted border—and wiped the perspiration that threatened to become running torrents in a moment, from his brow.

"There are a great many people here, aren't there?" said Reba brightly.

"There appear to be, miss," her partner murmured, clumsily groping for his coat pocket, and finally shoving his handkerchief out of sight in it. "There appear to be," he said again, and laid his two long arms horizontally along his long thighs, his big red hands pitifully apparent, as they rested upon each knee.

Reba, glancing down, saw now that the customary white cuff-line at the edge of the coat-sleeves was lacking. She saw, too, that something else was lacking—something more essential—half of the fingers, in fact, from her partner's left hand!

He seemed to be conscious of her glance, and her discovery too, for he shifted uneasily, and folded his arms, hiding completely both his red monstrosities.

"I don't believe I'm much of a partner for you," he apologized.

"Oh, yes, you are," Reba assured him, forgetting

her own embarrassment in her sudden desire to lessen his. "Oh, yes. *Really*. I don't want any one else," she said. Then, shouldering the entire responsibility of the conversation, she went on, "We ought to know each other's names, oughn't we? Mine's Jerome—Miss Rebecca Jerome," and after a pause, "What's yours?" she asked.

"Nathaniel Cawthorne, on paper," he answered. "But at sea I was called Nat Crow."

"You've been to sea?" she inquired, inspired to conversation by the kindness in her heart.

"I've been little where's else for the last eight years. Up in the crow's nest—away from people and things, most of the time. That's where I got my name. It used to be Nat Caw. A crazy Chinaman cut off those two fingers you noticed, when I was trying to pull myself into a life-boat off the China coast once," he explained. "I'm a rough, sea-faring fellow. I ought not to have come here, I guess." He was still apologizing.

"Oh, yes, you ought! Yes, you ought!" Reba told him.

Suddenly somebody struck a chord on the piano, and Miss Park announced that the blues and yellows would dance first. There was a rush for the floor. Reba and her partner, however, sat quite still in their places. Then shyly, "Do you dance?" inquired Reba.

"Oh, no. No. I don't." He seemed alarmed. "I don't know how to do any of those things. You go on, and leave me. I don't mind," he urged.

"Oh, I don't care about dancing," Reba cheerfully denied. "We can watch instead." And they did—for half an hour or so, sitting dumbly side by side, hidden



by swarms of standing couples in front of them—unobserved—unrescued.

Reba couldn't help but feel frequent little stabs of disappointment, now and again, as she sat idly on the side-lines with her feet on the rung of a chair in front of her, and her hands folded in her lap, silently looking on. Couple after couple went laughingly by her. It looked and sounded as if everybody was having a glorious time. The fun on the floor was like a wonderful, rollicking folk-dance to Reba—a folk-dance with young men! There was a grand "right-and-left" every little while, announced by a shrill whistle. Even the girls in the group in front of the platform, of which she would have been one if she hadn't fished the yellow four out from under the radiator, each got a gentleman partner in time. Her shoulders drooped, her expression was wistful.

"I guess I'm spoiling things for you," her partner commented at last, as if she had sighed aloud.

"Oh, no. Really," she said sweetly. Then, "Do you play parcheesi, or dominoes, or anything like that?" she inquired. For it had been explained by Miss Park beforehand that in the parlor adjoining the Assembly-hall tables with games were arranged especially for those who did not care to dance.

It seemed that "Number four" did sometimes try his hand at checkers. So Reba led the way into the almost empty parlor, and sat down before one of the checker-boards. "Number four" sat down opposite her. He was careful, as the game proceeded, to make all his moves with his right hand, and speedily conceal even that, as soon as possible, underneath the



table. He beat Reba in the first game, and apologized for it, shamefacedly.

"I don't know much how to act with ladies, I guess."

"Why, I think you do."

"You see, you're the first what I call 'white girl' I've spoken to for nearly eight years now."

"Oh, am I?" gasped Reba. "Shan't we play another game?" she suggested hastily.

They played four other games in all—long, silent games, with Reba's eyes steadfastly on the board. If she was the first "white girl" this man had spoken to for eight years, he, as well, was something of a novelty to her. During the deep, prolonged silences of those four games, Reba was not unconscious of the fact that this was the first time in her whole life that she had sat so long, so close, to any man. Their knees, she estimated, were within six inches of touching. She mustn't let such thoughts possess her. She tried to stifle them. He, too—Reba's partner too, out of his reverence for anything so soft and white-handed, so wistful-eyed, so gentle-voiced, so crisply ruffled, pink-sashed, as this feminine creature before him—he, too, tried to keep his thoughts from desecrating so much as the tips of her fingers.

He stayed until the music played "Home, Sweet Home" in the Assembly-hall. They were the only ones left in the parlor when one of the Alliance's hostesses thrust a head in at the door and sang out cheerfully, "Time for everybody to say good-night."

Reba observed, as "Number four" stood up to go, that he was feeling extremely ill at ease again. She thought she knew why, and in an attempt to help him



over the difficult ceremony of saying a proper good-night, she said:

"I've had a very pleasant evening."

He ignored the remark.

"There's something," he began, "I mean," he floundered, "I haven't quite made out yet how it came about—you and me being partners."

"Oh! Didn't you hear it explained?"

"Yes, I did, but you see, I saw pretty plain what happened first. I know when I'm made fun of. I've been trying to make out if it was *you* all the time. I'm rigged wrong, I know. I don't blame anybody for wishing to chuck me—but—but——"

"No. It wasn't I!" Reba denied vehemently. "It wasn't I! I found your number on the floor. She must have dropped it. I wouldn't care, if I were you, what she did."

"I don't care," he smiled at Reba. "I thought it couldn't be *you*," he said. "Well," after a second, "I'll be going now, I guess."

"I guess you better," agreed Reba.

Still he hesitated. Then suddenly courageous, "You wouldn't shake hands with me good-night, would you?" he asked. "My right hand's all there."

"Why, of course I will."

He didn't really shake her hand. He just held it in a big damp clasp a moment, then dropped it.

"Say," he said afterward, not looking at her—he had dragged out a cloth cap from a pocket somewhere, and kept his eyes on that—"you wouldn't go out with me anywhere, would you? I mean—you wouldn't consider—it wouldn't be just the thing, I suppose, for such

as *you* to go to a 'movie'—or anything like that, would it, with a rough diamond like *me*?"

"Why, I'd like to go," Reba told him from the fullness of her heart.

His eyes lighted.

"Would you meet me at the Garden Theater Monday night, at quarter to eight o'clock?" he asked.

Reba's sewing-class met Monday nights. Never mind! She knew from experience the kind of starvation his eyes expressed.

"I'll be very glad to meet you there," she told him.



## CHAPTER X

THAT night Reba dreamed about the swarthy-skinned Italian whom she had stolen down the hill so many winter nights to watch, as he stood before the little mirror in the basement of the mills at home and brushed his hair. It disturbed Reba to dream about the Italian. Sitting in one of the city's big churches the next day, she did not try to follow the sermon of the preacher in the pulpit. She tried to convince herself that there was nothing wrong in her new friendship. The Italian and her partner of last night had nothing to do with each other. Her dream was just a circumstance. She acknowledged that she had allowed her imagination to take liberties indeed with the Italian,—harmless little liberties, after all, did she but know—but not with her new acquaintance. No! Besides, she had never been to a "movie"; she had never been taken anywhere by a young man. Of course he wasn't a summer-hotel kind of young man, and Lollie Terrence had discarded him at a glance. But beggars couldn't be choosers, could they? She *must* go *now*. She had promised. It would be unkind—it would hurt him if she failed him now. Imagine—just imagine—she was desired by him!

She dressed her carefulest on Monday night, put on a fresh white waist and white kid gloves, and wore her bracelet and gold watch and chain. Of course he ought to have called for her. She knew that; but, after all, there was something exciting about stealing



out this way to meet him—nobody knowing—nobody in *all* the world knowing!

Her feet made a merry little clap-clap on the asphalt pavement as she tripped along. She wasn't going to stand in a dark corner, and just watch the Italian. He was actually going to speak to her—greet her to-night—take her with him! She was a little tremulous by the time she saw the bright red and yellow electric lights of the Garden Theater bobbing at her a block away. She had not been out on the city streets at night before. She hoped she wouldn't have long to wait under the glaring lights. She hoped he would come soon. Was it the Garden Theater, he said, after all? What if (he had spoken so hastily, mentioned the meeting-place just once) what if she had misunderstood? And just where should she stand to wait for him? There were crowds of people! Reba stationed herself by one of the iron posts that held up the portico. Oh, she hoped she had not done wrong to come.

"Hello," suddenly a voice said at her side. She glanced up. It was he! Relief surged through her.

"Good evening," she replied.

"Good evening," he echoed.

"I didn't know whether you'd be here or not," she went on nervously.

"Be here! I've been here since seven. I was afraid I wouldn't know you without the ruffles. But say," triumphantly, "I knew you the first minute. I've gotten tickets," he told her.

He had bought tickets for *her*—with *his* money! The color mounted to her cheeks.

"Then shall we go in?"



"I'd like to—if *you* would," he replied humbly.

It was darkish inside. The lights had already been lowered. It was a long, narrow, little theater-space, with red-and-gold walls. Reba felt, rather than saw, that already it was packed with people. She followed the tall shadow of her escort, gropingly along the dim, gradually-descending aisle, and finally felt herself crowding by half a dozen or so human beings who were standing and pressing back to let her by them. Reba and her companion sat down finally in two narrow little seats, side by side, tucked up against the wall.

They sat there for two hours and a half, with scarcely a word to each other. The music, the close, smothery atmosphere, the proximity of so many vague breathing bodies about her, the ever-shifting, ever-changing conglomeration of events upon the screen before Reba, the oft-recurring stab of consciousness of the big piece of masculinity beside her, filled the girl with queer, new sensations of excitement and curiosity.

When finally the screen before her announced a huge "good night," and the audience began to stir and stand up, Reba felt as if she had been sitting there for weeks, with her sleeve slightly grazing the rough, burlapish material of the sailor's coat beside her. She seemed to wake from the dream only when the cool night air struck her forehead, and the familiar street-noises—trolley-cars and passing automobiles—made her realize that she had simply been to an evening moving-picture show, as Mamie did every week of her life.

Still she couldn't begin to talk immediately, nor the sailor either, evidently. For they were inarticulate



for at least ten minutes after his single inquiry at the end of the performance if he might see her to her door.

It was Reba at last who spoke.

"I've had a very pleasant evening," she said, in her little old-school way.

"You wouldn't go again with me, would you?" he broke out earnestly. "It wouldn't be just the thing, would it? Of course you wouldn't go *again* with me?"

The pleading tone of his voice could not be lost on one of even so little experience as Reba. It did not displease her. It was rare music to Reba Jerome.

"I might," she heard herself replying.

"Oh, would you? Thursday? There are new pictures twice a week. You don't know quite what it means to a fellow like me, I guess." His voice almost broke.

Reba heard it.

"I'd be very pleased to come."

They said good-night under the light that shone over the front entrance of the Women's Alliance. Of her own accord, Reba extended her white-gloved hand in farewell. Nathaniel Cawthorne held it in just the same reverent manner he had held her bare hand on Saturday night, and long enough this time to say, looking down upon it,

"Thank you for wearing your pretty white gloves for me, miss."

There was scarcely a Monday or Thursday evening during the half-dozen weeks that followed that Reba didn't put on a fresh waist and spotless white kid gloves, and steal out after supper to keep her strange



tryst. She and her sailor friend always went to the same place of amusement, met at the same hour, at the same spot; always spent the same silent two hours and a half, side by side, in the dim intimate atmosphere of the crowded theater.

There was something persuasive, irresistibly luring, to Reba, about those long quiet periods of speechless communion with the big strange man of the sea. Afterward, always as on the first night, she felt as if she had been to a region remote and secluded, a region in which she was groping along a winding path—a beguiling path, too, leading she knew not whither. Whenever he did speak, his voice paid homage; whenever he did look at her, which as time went on was less and less frequent, his eyes worshiped.

She was aware of the crudeness of his exterior. Aunt Augusta would have spurned him at sight, as a creature who belonged to a lower strata of society; if not actually a foreigner, anyhow, alien to one of Reba's bringing up, and no one for her to hold conversation with. The fact was, Reba didn't hold much conversation with him. There seemed to be little opportunity for speech between them—only the short walk of a half-dozen blocks or so after the performance; and words somehow were out of place after the enthralling experience of a speechless two hours and a half side by side.

It was probably this feature of silence that deepened the intimacy between Reba and Nathaniel Cawthorne. The conventionalities of speech would have increased the self-consciousness of both of them, and frightened off all spontaneous impulses. The unsophisticated sailor did nothing to frighten Reba. In spite of his



rough clothes, he was possessed of a certain fineness of feeling that knew by instinct how not to shock or offend. Even his occasional use of "miss" and "ma'am" did not jar on Reba. His grammatical errors were not glaring ones, but, if they had been, the rare quality of his infrequent speeches would have more than made up for whatever their handicap in the way of the words that clothed them.

Reba knew very little about him, when it came to actual facts, scarcely more than what he had told her the first night, and he knew even less about her; but neither probed nor questioned. Perhaps they both hesitated to disturb the almost dreamlike reality of their friendship.

As time went on and the bi-weekly meetings became more and more fraught with significance, Reba became a little troubled, anxious; and yet she let herself drift. New as she was in affairs of this sort, she was as loath to show her ignorance as an inexperienced traveler who shrinks from asking questions. She preferred to err, take a wrong turn or two, than to appear ridiculous. She told herself that her new acquaintance might be unaware of a deepening significance in their relations. She was so in the habit of feeding her soul on improbabilities that doubtless now she was imagining absurdities about his innocent friendliness.

For instance, she herself was keenly aware that of late his coat more than barely grazed her sleeve. She could feel his warm arm. But perhaps *he* did not feel *hers*. She was acutely conscious of the time when their feet first came in contact down there in the dark, underneath the seats. But perhaps *he* was not con-



scious of it. Lately, when he crossed his long legs, the touch of the back of his ankle against the front of hers was like a sharp caress to Reba. What was it to him, she wondered? She was careful always to sit very still, almost inert in her place beside him, neither moving toward him, as if to invite, nor drawing away, as if to forbid; half-curious, half-enticed, full of wonderment as to how much she was manufacturing of his pleasure in her nearness, how much, if any, he really felt.

At last, however, there came the red-letter night, when all Reba's doubt as to her companion's awareness of her closeness to him was swept away by the stealthy imprisoning of her bare left hand in his good right one.

Her hand was not lying, as usual, far away from him, in her lap, but innocently on the edge of the seat, in the dark, deep space between them. The first touch of the sailor's fingers had almost choked Reba, and the gradual enveloping of her hand in his had made her heart pound, and sent the blood rushing to her face.

What ought she to do? He had her hand imprisoned closely now! Might it not hurt his feelings if she made a motion of disapproval? He was so sensitive—so fearful always that he would offend. Reba sat very still. How strange—it swooped down upon her how strange a thing it was to feel her hand enclosed like this. She shut her eyes. It hadn't been all vain imagining then. He had been aware! Oh, surely, she admonished herself, she was not doing right to sit motionless like this. All her instincts told her she was tasting forbidden fruit. And yet—



and yet—she had hesitated so long, she couldn't snatch her hand away now, could she? It would be crude, awkward. She sat in suspense, unconscious of what was flashing on the screen before her. She sat in exhilarating and torturing suspense for what seemed hours and hours, not daring to quiver as much as a finger of the hand this strange man held. It was not until people were beginning to stand up to go that her hand was free again, released by the stranger's own accord at last.

He would not look at her afterward. He could not speak, it seemed. Walking beside her the dark way back to the Women's Alliance, he hung his head, slunk along. His good-night was nothing but an unintelligible murmur.

Later, Reba in her room held up the hand that had been held close, to the electric light by her chiffonier. It glowed deep pink. She looked it over—back and front—wonderingly.

"I'm glad! I'm glad!" she whispered defiantly.

The next morning brought a letter to Reba. It was written in a neat, careful hand. There were no words misspelled. Its grammar was flawless.

MISS REBECCA JEROME.

MY DEAR MISS REBECCA JEROME:

I will come to-morrow night to see you at seven o'clock.

Yours truly,

MR. NATHANIEL CAWTHORNE.

That was all. It was brief, so brief that it breathed its importance. Reba's folk-dancing class met that night, but she must see Mr. Nathaniel Cawthorne, of course. There was no doubt about that. But where

—just where could she see him? Surely not in the Alliance's parlors, pleasant as they were, and designed especially for young men callers, with a series of alcoves along one side. The partitions between the alcoves were low, and did not conceal the head and shoulders of those inside the enclosures. Somebody would be sure to see her caller, Reba concluded. Mamie had already caught a glimpse of him once at the "Movies," and had jovially inquired afterward where Reba had picked up that "gink." Miss Park herself might see him—the wonderful Miss Park, for whom every night of late a marvelous young man of the summer-hotel type called in a low gray racing-car, and whisked her away with him to her home in one of the city's exclusive suburbs.

Reba had developed a burning admiration for Miss Park. Miss Katherine Park had become a model to her of all things fine and splendid, and, unexplainable as it was to Reba, the object of her worship went out of her way to be kind to her (or so it seemed), not in a patronizing way—that was the strange part—but just as if Reba were a friend of hers. More than once she had slipped her arm familiarly through Reba's at the lunch hour, and eaten on a tray beside her in the Cafeteria; more than once Miss Park had climbed the two long flights to Reba's room, and sat down with a bit of sewing and talked; and last week they had gone shopping together.

Reba had asked Miss Park, rather shyly at first, where the best place was to go for a new dress or two which she wanted to buy, and Miss Park had personally conducted her. They were going shopping again the day after to-morrow. Reba was very



anxious that Miss Katherine Park should think well of her. If she saw the sailor in his queer clumsy clothes, talking with her in one of the alcoves (Miss Park often remained late in the evening) Reba feared she would not stand so high in her idol's estimation. No. She must not see her new friend here.

It was May. Warm. She would take him across to the Public Gardens. She would hover outside the front door of the Alliance, and spare him the embarrassment of asking for her from one of the girls on duty, and then they could go in search of an empty settee.

When she saw him coming a block away, she hastened to meet him. He wasn't expecting her; he was looking steadfastly straight ahead, and he passed by her first, unaware.

She had to turn back and run after him with a tremulous little, "Oh, please, here I am."

He turned at that, and stopped short at sight of her.

"I want to talk with you some place," he said.

"Yes, I know. Couldn't we go over to one of the seats in the Gardens?" she asked.

"That would be all right, I suppose," he replied.

It was a warm night. A dark, velvety shadow, cast by a thick-leaved horse-chestnut tree in full bloom fell across half of the long bench that Reba and her companion selected. There were bright electric lights illuminating a gorgeous bed of tall tulips in front of them; there were people passing, now and then, sounds of voices occasionally, the ripple of a distant fountain; and over a bridge arching across a bit of quiet water, through the leafy branches of intervening

trees, could be seen the lights of one of the city's main thoroughfares, with trolley-cars moving up and down upon it. As soon as Reba and the sailor were seated in the dark black shadow of the horse-chestnut tree, he began to talk to her, sitting well away from her, not touching her, taking off his cap, as if out of deference, and speaking with difficulty at first.



## CHAPTER XI

I DON'T know how to put it—just exactly—what I've got to say, nor what to put first," he began. "There appears to be so much, but after last night, as I turned it over in my mind, it seemed pretty clear there was only one honorable thing for a man to say to any one he honored, as I do you. Of course I may be all wrong. I've been away from these parts so many years, there may be new ways and customs now, but I've got to say what seems honorable to me to say, and run the risk of making a mistake, haven't I, miss?"

"Of course," Reba murmured.

"I thought at first," he went on, "that first night, I mean, you might be one of the workers there—secretaries or something—one of those fine charity ladies. At least I did until you said you'd let me take you out somewhere. Even then I wasn't quite sure that you weren't just taking pity on me, until—until—you know, miss," he said to her, in a low confidential voice. "Oh, I want you to feel sure," he told her earnestly, "that when anybody so—so—so—anybody like *you*—through some miracle of heaven lets me see her so often, and lets me—lets me—I'm not a chap who has a girl in every port. I'm not just passing the time with you," he broke off. "I know I ought to have told you my honorable feelings, and laid bare my history to you, before I went so far as I did last night. I was ashamed afterwards. You had a right to know more about me. I took advantage of your ignorance."

He stopped abruptly, put on his cap, and thrust his hands down deep into his loose coat pockets. Reba sat very still in the dark corner, not knowing what to say.

"I killed somebody once," he brought out at last in a low tone.

"Oh!" gasped Reba, and caught her breath.

"Don't be afraid. I wouldn't hurt *you*."

"I'm not afraid," she told him. "I'm not the least bit afraid."

"I killed my own mother," he added. And after a pause, "No one in all the world knows that but me—and now *you*—now *you*," he repeated.

"And I don't believe it!" said Reba.

"I guess you'll have to, miss," he smiled wearily in the dark. "I'm going to tell you all about it.

"I was brought up in a little place, way up in the corner of Maine, right near the border of Canada," he went on. "I was fifteen when I saw it last. That was when I ran away to sea. It was a poor little town—just a few little houses, and one small store, and no railroad nearer than twelve miles. We—me and my mother and my stepfather—lived six miles away from the store—on a kind of rocky clearing on the edge of some woods, in an old weather-beaten sort of shack, with tar paper nailed all over one side of it, to keep out the wind.

"It wasn't much of a place for a woman like my mother to live. She'd been used to things nice. She was a school-teacher once—my mother was. She was a small, delicate little thing. I wish I had a picture of my mother. There was something about her eyes and forehead, just here," he tapped his brow, "that



was full of knowing, and it didn't matter how hard she worked, how rough her hands got, nor how drawn and thin and worn-out she was with being sick, and having babies one after another, that died when they were born, she never lost that fine look about her eyes.

"My stepfather hated me," he continued. "He liked trapping and hunting and killing things in the woods, and I didn't. He hated anything to do with a farm, and mother and me used to have to tend the cow; and it was us too, who hoed the potatoes usually, or chopped the kindling. He was cross and glum by nature, but worse when he'd been drinking. It was when he'd been drinking that he used to whip me sometimes, when my mother wasn't around. He used a strap—a thin little cutting strap. It hurt. It used to make me holler. Fact was, he'd keep at it till I did holler. But I think the things my mother had to bear from that beast of a man, when he was drunk, were worse than my floggings. I can't think of it now, without getting mad all over again."

He stopped—for so long, in fact, that Reba had to remind him gently. He seemed to drag himself back to the narrative with an effort.

"I always wanted an education," he took up. "I didn't care about anything, when I was a kid, but things in books—seems though. My mother knew how I felt, and did all she could to help me. Lots of times she'd do the chores around the place herself, so's I could have the time to study. When I got through with the district school I began going to an academy twenty miles from our place. I used to walk across to the railroad four miles from our farm—if



you could call it a farm—every morning, and get a train that went right near the academy. The engineer used to let me ride for nothing. And at night I'd come back with him, and walk home again—four miles, in time to milk and do a few chores. I took literature at the academy," he told her with pride, "and French and Latin. I know a little Latin now!

"My mother and me used to talk just hours about when I'd go to college. You see there was a camp near us—a city-folks' camp, on a lake where there was good fishing. It was quite a stylish camp—all fixed up with cute little log-cabins, and one main dining-room. They needed their towels and sheets washed during the summer-time over at the camp, and my mother did a lot of 'em for them. The money she got for it she kept hidden in an old broken bean-jug under the shed. It was my college money. When my stepfather wasn't around we used to take it out and count it. There was most a hundred dollars in it when my mother died. She didn't know she was going to die—my mother didn't. I didn't *mean* to kill her. But I meant to kill *somebody*!

"You see, my father got worse, miss. The drink got hold of him worse. He used to guide some of the men up at the camp sometimes. He'd keep straight on a job all right, but it got so he was just never sober when he was home, loafing, with mother and me. It got so I couldn't bear seeing my mother suffer—and so—I'll tell you how it happened.

"One day—one awful hot day in July, when my mother was washing, and I was turning the heavy wringer for her, she sort of swayed, and fell over



in a heap. And when she came to, I was sitting on the floor and had her kind of half up in my arms. She wasn't much larger than you, miss—and even at fifteen I was a pretty big fellow. When she came to I said to her, 'Is there going to be another dead baby, mother?' You see, I knew from experience—her fainting that way.

"She looked up at me, like a deer I saw die once, after my father had shot him, and she nodded, and big tears came out of her eyes.

" 'I wish he was dead! Oh, I wish Joe was *dead!*' my mother said to me in a whisper (Joe was my stepfather), and began to cry right against me—here." He touched his shoulder.

"I'll never forget it. She was like a little helpless child. My stepfather was snoring up in the loft, at that moment, and I wished he was dead, too! He was killing her, miss. She was a frail little thing. Oh, so weak and frail—like a hepatica, the kind that grow in the woods up there—no color hardly at all.

"From that moment I began to think of ways of killing my stepfather. At first I just kind of played with the idea, the way you imagine holding up trains and things. But each time he came home drunk, and talked rough to my sick mother, and made her march around and mind him, as if she was a dog, and cry nights, my thoughts got down to real business. The scheme I hit on finally came all in a flash one Sunday morning when my stepfather was out in the shed cleaning his guns and rifles. He loved fire-arms, and was as tender with them as a woman with a baby. He'd kind of pat and stroke them, and call them his beauties. I was never allowed to touch any of my



stepfather's fire-arms. They were kept in one corner of the kitchen. Once, when I'd been sweeping up, I'd moved them, and I was whipped for it. My mother couldn't touch them either. They were like something sacred.

"My stepfather never kept anything loaded, except just his revolver. It was a rule with him. He could absolutely rely on the certainty that those guns of his were unloaded, when they were standing in their corner in the kitchen. The Sunday morning I got my inspiration I saw my stepfather pull the trigger of his Springfield with the muzzle pointed right at his chest.

"'What if it had been loaded!' I thought. It stuck in my mind. 'What if it had been loaded!'

"Well, miss, I loaded that Springfield—'twas his favorite then—I loaded it late one Saturday night. He usually cleaned his guns Sunday mornings. I crawled out of my warm cot, and lit a candle, and loaded the thing! I couldn't sleep after it, I was so frightened.

"He went fishing Sunday morning instead of cleaning his guns, and I had to hang around all day, with that murder of mine hidden away inside that slender steel shaft over in the corner there. When he got home, he flung me a big catch of bass and sent me out to the shed with a lantern to clean them. It was a dark, drizzly evening, raining, I remember. When I came into the kitchen with my job done, my stepfather had got all his rags, and pieces of chamois, and oil, and polish, and things, spread out on the eating-table, and the kerosene lamp to see by. My heart was



right in my mouth—felt like. There was the Springfield; I spied it in the corner, waiting for him.

“My mother was lying down up in the loft. She was always lying down those days when she got the chance. She’d been lying down up there most all day. I was glad she wasn’t around. I went into the pantry, quietly as I could, with my plate of fish, and stood, staring out through a crack. My stepfather was whistling to himself, hardly conscious I’d come in, I guess. It was tense, I can tell you, when he picked up his rifle, ran his practiced eye over it, brushed its smooth shaft with two fingers, and then glanced at the trigger. He had the rifle hugged up to him close, and was whistling softly when he pulled that trigger; but the muzzle was not pointed towards any part of my stepfather. It was pointed towards the steep flight of stairs that went up the loft. The shot went off with a terrible report, and my stepfather let go the thing as if he had been struck, and swore, and let it drop to the floor with a crash. I came out of the closet. I had no idea what had happened till I looked over to the stairs where my stepfather was staring. Then I saw! Then I saw, miss!

“She was struck in the side as she came down the stairs. She was in her stocking-feet, and my stepfather didn’t hear her, you see. It wasn’t *his* murder. I guess she died right off. Anyway, she wasn’t able to say good-by to me, nor smile, nor anything like that.” He paused. “My mother looked very pretty when the undertaker finished with her,” he went on finally. “There was a kind of peaceful expression. She looked as if she wasn’t feeling sick a bit any more.



And when I held her hand I felt as if *she* wasn't sorry about what had happened.

"But they were black days for me after my mother was buried—what with the inquest and everything. I was scared—scared like any guilty boy who's afraid he's going to be caught and locked up. I don't believe I've much what you call 'front.' I was scared to death I'd be found out. I swore readily enough that the shooting was accidental on my stepfather's part. It was, of course, and he got off scot-free, as I suppose he had a right. But he wouldn't let up nagging me about how his rifle got loaded. He flogged and flogged me one night, to make me say I'd been fooling with it, but I wouldn't give in. No, sir. I preferred to lie, and be whipped to death, than imprisoned for life for murder. 'Twasn't long before my stepfather caught on to how it frightened me to be accused of having loaded that gun (though it never crossed his mind what my motive was, I guess)—and he used to threaten he'd tell the sheriff who was really responsible for my mother's death, if I didn't do this or that thing to please him.

"He wanted to make a drudge out of me, miss. He wanted me to cook, and clean, and wash for him, after my mother died, and do the chores and tend the cow, and work the garden; and when September came, and I told him, one time, my school would begin in a week, he laughed and sneered, and said there was to be no more of that funny business. He even stole the money my mother had saved for my college education. He'd known about it all the time, it seems, and when I tried to argue with him that it was mine he sent me for the little narrow leather strap. My



mother was in her grave, and could not offer any more her soft body to ward off floggings from mine. My stepfather flung that piece of information to me once, in language less pretty, miss. Oh, I was miserable—frightened and miserable—like a cur that's gotten kicked and kicked, and all the spirit knocked out of him.

"My stepfather said how I was his property till I was twenty-one, and I was to do as he wanted, and no squawking about it either. I was only fifteen. I didn't dare ask anybody, who might know, whether or not a boy of my age did belong to his stepfather like that. I was afraid I'd get some one suspicious about the murder I planned. I was afraid of my own shadow those days.

"Well, finally, in November, my stepfather suddenly went off guiding on a week's hunting trip. It was the first job he'd had since my mother died, and I saw my chance. With a week's start, I might get to some of those seaport places on the coast of Maine, and get out of the country somehow or other. I made up my mind to try anyhow. I had that much spirit left.

"Six days later, I slipped down over the edge of a big, black slimy dock at low tide, one evening, hung in space a second or two, then dropped softly four feet, onto the deck of what proved to be a big five-masted creature, a mysterious animal to me then, slipping slowly out to sea—out to safety," he added with a deep sigh, as if of relief.

"Is that all?" asked Reba in a small voice, after a long pause.

"I'm over the worst part," he assured her. "The

rest I've got to say needn't scare you. I've never been back to Maine," he resumed. "I've followed the sea ever since—steady for eight years now, round about the Pacific mostly—South Sea trading schooner for the last five years. The sea isn't what you'd call a refining life, like the city; nor educating, like college, but a fellow can keep clean and decent on it, if he's a mind; and as for me—I've no fancy nor never had for mixing up in the mire of every foreign port I touched, like some chaps. I preferred just to stick close to my boat. Of course I've had my knocks, and got my scars, and they aren't pretty, but they're all on the outside. You've a right to know that. Oh, I want you to feel certain," he broke out earnestly, "that even though I am capable of murder—I want you to feel certain, Miss Rebecca Jerome," he spoke her name reverently, "that you and my mother are the only women in my life."

His voice trembled a little, and he leaned and scooped up a bit of gravel in his hand, as if to cover up by the casual act the fervor of his feelings. He sifted it from palm to palm as he proceeded.

"When the 'Louise' struck Boston two months or so ago," he went on, explanatory, "I knew she'd be laid up a long spell for repairs. We had a bad time coming north after we'd rounded the Cape. So I decided to put up here in a kind of gentleman's place. I always did like clean white sheets," he put in. "Poor as our shack was up there on the edge of the woods, and mean as my mother felt, she saw to it I always had my clean sheet and pillow-case every Saturday night, 'well as the city-folks up at the Camp. Well, I'd often heard of these Young Men's Christian Clubs.



They're all over. There's one in Shanghai. I thought it would be a good clean place to stop at here, so that was how I happened to see the notice of the entertainment from the Ladies' Alliance, where you and me met. I kind of wanted to meet some nice American young ladies. There used to be some nice girls at the academy, though I never dared to more than look at them. I was kind of hungry I guess, miss, that night you got my number—to know somebody like you, and I've been getting kind of hungrier since, I'm afraid. That's why I took such a liberty last night, before you knew anything about me. I hope you'll excuse it. I hope you'll understand too," he hurried on, "that when I offer myself to you, it isn't with any notion I'm worthy of such as you. It's just to prove my high and honorable feelings. You've only to kick me into the gutter," he laughed, or tried to, "but—if you'll be so good as not to do it to-night, please—not to be unkind *to-night*."

"I don't want to be unkind to you—*ever*," said Reba, earnestly.

"Oh, miss," he burst forth, "if I could but think you were wishing me well, back here! I'm off next week—not on the 'Louise.' I'm part owner now on a freighter—an old bark, but tight and sea-worthy—the 'Ellen T. Robinson.' She's going to ply between ports in the South Pacific, where I'm familiar; and we've got a cargo for her at last, so we won't have to run her in ballast round Cape Horn. I've put all I've got into the 'Ellen T. Robinson.' She may bring me big money. If she does—if she should—oh, miss," he tossed the gravel in his hand far off into some grass, and rubbed his palms together hard. "I'll be

back here in three years," he told Reba. "Perhaps I'll be back rich. I'd be more worthy of you then. Perhaps too I can make myself finer—somehow—read more, study nights—and——" He stopped abruptly. His voice was trembling again. "I get sort of carried away sometimes, I'm afraid," he apologized.



## CHAPTER XII

HE left Reba half an hour later at the door of the Alliance. She had barely spoken the whole evening. He had suggested he'd rather she didn't speak for a while—told her he'd just as soon she'd "mull over" for a few days what he'd said to her.

"You must feel kind of upset, and surprised about me to-night, miss," he said, with his intuitive appreciation. "*I* know. Mine's not a very pretty sort of story for such as you to listen to. I'd rather what I've told you stayed with you a while, and soaked in, so's when you have to, you can talk to me gentle and quiet-like. If you don't mind, miss, I'll go away to-night, just remembering how you said you don't want to be unkind to me—*ever*, without risking anything else you might have to tell me to spoil it."

It *wasn't* perhaps a very "pretty sort" of story for Reba to listen to, shielded as she had always been; but it wasn't unbeautiful. Parts of it were more richly, stirringly beautiful than anything she had ever heard. It swept over her, after she had climbed to her room that night, and stood gazing out at the glow that the city's lights made in the sky, how drab her life had been—how cramped and stunted in comparison to the sailor's. Nothing big in it. No great devotion—no great feeling of any kind. She had been buried, and everybody inside the gray house at the top of Chestnut Street had been buried along with her, under layers of mean little self-centered

thoughts, mean little self-centered acts, for years and years. The sailor's life had a glow like the sky, Reba thought.

She couldn't go to sleep after she had crawled into the little bed in the corner. There was so much to think about! Ridgefield was only three months away, and yet a man had told her she was the only woman in his life, beside his mother. She believed, too, that she had been asked in marriage! If so—why, the magic wand had been waved over her, and she was no longer of the undesired.

Not that she could marry him. Of course not! He wasn't anybody she could *marry*, and take to Ridgefield, for instance; but anyhow, a man lived, such as he was, who had wanted her. No one could say she hadn't a right to a tender memory hereafter. Even Aunt Augusta's jibes would lose their edge now. Nathaniel Cawthorne had placed a crown upon Reba. She woke the next morning to the realization of its unfamiliar touch upon her brow, and with the queer sensation that she was somebody else. "No longer unwanted. No longer unwanted." Oh, more than a crown! The declaration of the stranger's regard for her completely surrounded Reba, cast about her a magical aura which made everything she looked at take on a roseate hue. The whole world seemed generous to Reba that morning. As she sat down at the breakfast-table, and heard herself greeted with a cheery salute or two, she glowed.

"Hello, Jeromey," sang out some one.

It was Mamie's particular nickname for her, but it was being adopted by many of the roomers in her corridor now. What a sound of good-fellowship it



had! Oh, to be acceptable to one's neighbors, to feel oneself included in the world's kindness, to be distinguished by some man's preference, even a man like the sailor, as she—strange, strange coincidence—as she now was distinguished, what warmth it kindled! It kindled, too, in Reba a new, shy self-confidence—a wistful desire to go more than half-way in smiles, greetings, and little acts of friendliness.

All day long the sound of her new friend's fervent voice recurred again and again to Reba, swooping down upon her at unaccountable moments and places, making her heart jump and sing. Crossing a crowded thoroughfare, dodging out of the path of a huge dray, passing into this class-room, out of that, the realization that somebody cared for her, more than he cared for anybody else in all the world, would pierce through Reba with a little sharp pleasing pain. It illumined the shopping-tour with Miss Park in the afternoon. The difference between her goddess and herself was not so great since the sailor's declaration. Reba, too, had been decorated; only once, true,—Miss Park was probably covered with badges—but once, *once* anyhow!

She rejoiced that her lover was so obviously unsuitable. There were so many fascinating paths she wanted to explore. She hadn't been to the theater once, yet, nor danced with a man; nor heard Grand Opera; nor ever dived off a raft into salt water. And the new gown that she had timidly confessed to Miss Park she wanted to be as fashionable as money could buy, (yes—blushing—she could afford to pay any amount, she guessed,) was still in process. The twenty-dollar hat, which Miss Park on a previous shopping-

tour had exclaimed was perfect on her, but ridiculously expensive, and which secretly the next day Reba had stolen back and bought, hadn't been out of the little oblong room; nor did she have yet more than a mere smiling acquaintance with the stranger whom she saw lately in her mirror—pompadourless, hair uncrimped, lying smooth and parted, and done low like Miss Park's. Oh, there were worlds and worlds for Reba to discover; and the sailor's love, if she might call it that, unreturned though it was, added magic sweetness to her new freedom.

Reba little guessed throughout that roseate-colored day of hers that her hour of happiness was to be so short. She had no premonition, when she started on her shopping-tour with Miss Park in the early afternoon, that a big, black, steam-driven monster, that had just snorted through Ridgefield, was hurling destruction toward her with every revolution of its ponderous wheels.

She hadn't been afraid of Ridgefield, nor anything nor anybody connected with Ridgefield, for weeks now. At first the persistent silence of her mother and aunts, their apparent resolve not to answer her letters nor communicate with her in any way, had disturbed her. But not lately. Nothing disastrous had developed. Two or three times her father had sent her papers to sign, accompanied by a brief note explaining them. He was never a wordy man, and Reba had not considered his uncommunicativeness about her aunts and mother a bad omen.

Aunt Augusta was far away indeed from her thoughts as she hummed a little quiet song to herself the night after Nathaniel Cawthorne made his con-



fession, standing in her tiny slate-walled dressing-room which, with a dozen others, bordered the swimming-pool, and donned the regulation dark blue swimming-suit, sleeveless, skirtless, reaching barely to her knees. She had been painfully self-conscious the first two or three times she had had to appear before the dozen girls and women in the pool in the abbreviated costume, but by this time she was perfectly at ease.

She was still humming when she appeared from the shower-bath five minutes later, sat down on the edge of the pool, and dangled her bare toes carelessly in the water. There was an ear-splitting din of high shrieks and hysterical laughter in the pool to-night. There usually was. Reba liked it. As she sat there dangling her toes, suddenly, with no warning, somebody gave her a shove from behind. It was little Lollie Terrence. Reba caught her shrill laugh before she struck the water.

What a friendly little creature Lollie was! Think of her bothering to play tricks on *her*—staid and proper, and twenty-five! Why, Lollie could do toe-dancing. Lollie was a great favorite. Well, it just seemed as if the world was possessed to be friendly to Reba to-day. She came up to the surface all smiles—rather sputtery ones—and pretended, with a playful motion, to splash water at Lollie Terrence, who was already dressed, and bent double over her joke beside the door of her dressing-room.

“All ready for a dive?” one of the instructors sang out to Reba. “Come, Miss Jerome, let’s do three perfect ones to-night.”

Reba’s suit was clinging to her tightly as she walked out to the end of the spring-board. Her rubber cap



hugged close to her forehead. Little streams of water dripped from her nose and finger-tips. She looked like a little slim Mercury with a close-cropped head, as she stood erect on the edge of the board a second. She had a boy's figure, with soft, gradual curves. Her profile was almost perfect. One was struck with the purity of line from finger-tip to ankle, as she stood and raised both her hands high in the air preparatory to springing, and inscribing, half in air, half in water, the big graceful semi-circle that inspired her so.

Reba could swim with some confidence now, and to-night her dive was a good one. The instructor told her so, as with her newly acquired over-arm stroke Reba approached the side of the tank. Of course, of course, it was a good one, she thought joyfully. Everything was good to-day.

"I'll try it again," she called out buoyantly.

"Do. You've a visitor in the gallery. Do try it again, and let her see it wasn't just an accident."

It was as sudden as that.

"A visitor?" queried Reba.

The instructor nodded. "Asked if she might look on a while," she said.

"A visitor?" Reba repeated.

"Over there. Left side." The instructor motioned galleryward, and turned away.

Reba glanced up. One glance was sufficient. It was Aunt Augusta!



## CHAPTER XIII

**T**HERE she sat, rigid, stern, admonishing. Reba made an attempt to smile, and raised her bare arm and waved. But there was no sign of recognition from Aunt Augusta. Reba never knew quite how she managed to summon enough courage to raise herself out of the water and expose to Aunt Augusta's merciless gaze her long bare legs and gleaming arms. Somehow, of course, she did accomplish it, for she found herself nervously dressing a minute or so later, teeth chattering (foolishly, for she was not cold) and a feeling in her throat that choked and hurt. What did it mean? Why had she come? Was anything wrong at home? Why couldn't she have written, and have been properly met and received?

When finally Reba was in a presentable costume, she hurried out of the little dressing-room, glanced into the mirror at the end of the corridor, and then hastened up the stairs to the gallery. It was empty. Aunt Augusta was not there. Down the stairs again she rushed—eager, anxious.

"Callers for you in the parlor," called out some one.

"Oh, thank you," gasped Reba.

When she entered the parlor a few minutes later, at the far end of the room she caught a glimpse of a familiar short black-stringed plume, at a familiar angle, on a familiar black-stringed bonnet. Also the white top of her father's head, half hidden by the low



dividing-wall between the alcoves. Her father here too! It must be for something of importance.

Aunt Augusta was sitting uncomfortably erect on the edge of her chair, with her black kid-gloved hands crossed in her lap, when Reba approached. Her father, clutching his Sunday derby, sat stooped and crestfallen, with his gaze upon the floor. For an instant Reba wondered if she ought to offer to greet them—they never kissed each other, but shake hands, or something like that. They had been separated for three whole months. The expression on Aunt Augusta's face, however, forbade any salute whatsoever. One full glance at it, and Reba knew she was still unforgiven.

"I—I didn't expect you," she began.

"Evidently," snapped Aunt Augusta, with a withering glance.

"I hope everything's all right at home," pursued Reba, tremulously. Absurd, of course, to be afraid of Aunt Augusta now. She was beyond the power of the old despot, of course. And yet——

"That's neither here nor there," said Aunt Augusta. "Sit down," she ordered, and Reba obeyed, from habit. Aunt Augusta straightened herself still more. "Your life here goes beyond my worst suspicions," she rebuked. "I never thought a blood relation of mine would come to *this*. It has nothing whatsoever to do with the business that has brought your father and me here, but to *see* you, with my *own* eyes, Rebecca Jerome, exposing yourself in such unmaidenly fashion, as I just have, and in such low and common company, is a shock I shan't soon get over."

"I wasn't exposing myself," Reba burst out. "It



isn't low company. You don't know—you don't understand." Her cheeks were scarlet.

"I should think you *would* blush," flung out Aunt Augusta. "And they call this a Christian organization in their catalog," she sneered.

"It has taught me more Christianity than I've known all my life," Reba defended.

"Humph!" sniffed Aunt Augusta. "The kind of Christianity that sanctions such bold and daring nakedness as I've just been witnessing isn't my kind, thank you. I never heard such unladylike sounds—such screams and unrefined laughter. Shop-girls I should call them—riff-raff! And *you*, brought up as *you've* been, mixing, as an equal, with low, vile company like that, bathing with them——"

"It isn't vile," interrupted Reba.

"Young ladies," pursued Aunt Augusta, "or so-called, who use such words as—I don't like even repeating them—such words as, 'darn,' and—'damn,'" she whispered. "I heard them!"

"Oh, that doesn't mean anything," Reba replied earnestly. "Not to them. No more than 'Mercy!' or 'Gracious!' to you. Just a difference in spelling. That's all."

"You see, David, you see! You see what your child's come to! Taking the Lord's name in vain is just a matter of *spelling* to her!"

"I don't quite mean that," stumbled Reba, "but, somehow, down here, it's different. You don't feel so—so literal as you do in Ridgefield. What if those girls do work in shops for their living? They're just as good as I am, and so kind and friendly—and I'm

so happy and contented here," she broke out. "Oh, don't let's quarrel. I don't want to quarrel."

"Is that the way you do your hair, now?" flashed out the older woman. "Where's your rat? Or aren't you fully dressed yet?"

"They don't wear rats any more," explained Reba. "Don't you like my hair this way?"

Aunt Augusta pursed her lips tight, in disapproval. It wasn't propitious, but Reba was willing to go more than half-way to-day.

"Oh, please, do let's be friendly and nice," she persevered. "Do tell me about Mother, and Aunt Emma, and everything at home. I'm so anxious to hear."

"Anxious!" scoffed Aunt Augusta. "Your mother might be dead for all you know, or seem to care."

"I've written every week," gently Reba reminded.

"And haven't heard a word from us in thirteen and a half weeks. Not from one of us—your father included—except for those business letters. I know. I've kept tabs. Not a word, and still you could stay on here, selfishly enjoying yourself, not sure but what we were all dead. It's high time, young lady, for you to have to think about somebody else besides Rebecca Jerome."

"Perhaps I *have* been selfish—a little," acknowledged Reba generously. "Perhaps I ought to have come home for over a Sunday. I can now. I will, sometime soon."

"You'll come for longer than for over a Sunday," gloatingly nodded Aunt Augusta. Then, turning to the crestfallen man beside her, who was still gazing carpetward, "Tell her, David. You better tell her what brought you and me down on this expensive trip."



David glanced over at Reba. "You've got to come home, Reba," he murmured. "We come down to fetch you home."

The tone of her father's voice alarmed Reba. Was it money? Had they lost all their money?

"What's happened? Tell me what's happened, Father."

"You tell her, Augusta," he appealed.

Reba turned to her aunt. There was a kind of sanctimonious expression about her, the same pious look which Reba had seen there before, especially on Communion Sundays at home after Aunt Augusta had raised her head from silent prayer.

"Well, Aunt Emma and I aren't going to make our home in Ridgefield any more," she announced impressively.

"Where are you going to make it?" gasped Reba.

"We're going to live with Cousin Syringa up in Machias. She's all alone up there with that half-witted boy of hers, and we're going to help her out."

"But—but—" feebly remonstrated Reba, "she's always been alone with him since he was born thirty years ago, hasn't she? You never felt you had to go before, did you? Why just now? Why do you have to go *just now*?"

"It's come to us as our duty," she told Reba briefly.

"But she—Cousin Syringa's just a cousin, while Mother's your own sister, and——"

"Syringa has no daughter," cut in Aunt Augusta, "while Eunice has got *you* to take care of her," she brought out with a triumphant smile.

"When do you plan to go?"



"As soon as I can get you properly trained into the care of your mother."

"Oh, but please," burst out Reba, a little hysterically, "couldn't you—couldn't you please put it off for a little while? Till I finish a few of the things I've begun here? Just out of kindness to me, I mean?"

"I've put it off already twenty-five years—out of kindness to you," replied Aunt Augusta. "You've been relieved from taking care of your own mother ever since you grew up. I guess you can afford to give up a little of your own pleasure now, out of kindness to *us*, who've been doing your work for you all this time."

"But I never went to boarding-school," Reba's voice trembled, "nor to college, nor never mixed with young people my own age, and—and I am getting it all *here*. I'm taking such interesting courses! But I've been here only three months, and one can't get much in three months. If you would—if you *could* put off going, I mean, till I had had a year, or perhaps two here, then I'd come home happily, and take care of Mother all the rest of my life."

"My mind is quite made up to go immediately, and I don't change my mind, as you know."

It was no use. Reba saw with sickening certainty that it was no use to plead. Aunt Augusta had made up her mind. Aunt Augusta, the invincible, the unconquerable, had found a way to defeat Reba—to crush her. No use to cry for mercy. Oh, no use to beg for grace. A wave of self-pity swept over Reba. She wanted to be alone. She wanted to get away from this hard cruel woman who was so eager to thwart her happy adventure. Cousin Syringa lived meagerly in a neglected, illy-equipped farm-house on the out-



skirts of Machias, Maine, but Aunt Augusta, all other devices failing, was ready to endure any personal annoyance or hardship rather than to be ignored by one to whom once her slightest wish had been law. Anything to break Reba's defiance. Anything to make the girl submit to the old authority again.

Alone, later, in the little oblong room, Reba sat and gazed out at the glowing sky with a hard tense expression on her gentle mouth. She had got to leave the glow. She had got to go home. There was no escape. She had got to go home, and grow old and dried and bloodless in the gray mausoleum. And all because of the spite of an old embittered woman. It was ungenerous of Aunt Augusta; it was cruel of her; it was unchristian. It was a hundred times more unchristian than Lollie's "darn it" or Mamie's "damn"!

Of course she must go. No other way was open. Certain precepts of right and wrong were graven deep in her heart. Her duty lay clear and straight before her. In New England—or in that corner of it where Ridgefield was located—a daughter's obligation to a helpless parent was absolute. Reba had watched many a young woman grow middle-aged and gray, and some young men, in such service. Betrothals were prolonged for years and years, as a matter of course, or broken, abandoned entirely, rather than to fail in performing the first duty to a dependent father or mother. The hills around Ridgefield, Reba well knew, were dotted with remote, lonely little farm-houses, where hopes and young dreams were slowly fading year by year, as the spark of life in the old white-haired lady, or trembling man, who always sat in the high-backed rocker by the front window, miraculously lingered on, like the vi-



tality in the broken limb of an old tree in the orchard. And now Reba's little new-born dreams—just a litter of fumbling half-blind mites of life now, with their eyes scarcely open—must die, too, slowly, one by one, while she performed her duty as a daughter.

Of course money could buy an outsider to fill the position of companion and comforter to her invalid mother. In some parts of the world, under some circumstances, it might be done with honor—but not in Ridgefield. No. If any such possibility did occur to Reba, she banished it instantly as unworthy. Only the close relationship of Aunt Augusta to her mother, and the gradual drift of circumstances, had made it ethically possible for her to attempt her present adventure at all. She must go home. There was no choice. She must go home. She must submit, stoop, and lift the heavy cross that Aunt Augusta so gloatingly cast upon her young shoulders.

The thought of the very atmosphere of Ridgefield (even with Aunt Augusta in Machias) was soul-shivering to Reba. She smiled to herself bitterly in the dark. She could not wear the pretty new gowns in Ridgefield. People would think her extravagant and extreme. The twenty-dollar hat would look out of place in the Jerome pew on Sunday and there was nowhere else to wear it. If she returned even with the style of dressing her hair changed, it would be discussed, she supposed. In Ridgefield you felt critical eyes gazing at you from behind shrouded windows as you walked along past the houses. Everybody knew you in Ridgefield, had always known you, and if you did anything unexpected, you became marked and conspicuous. And of what use in Ridge-



field, she cried out to the pink glow in the city sky, was diving, and one-stepping, and folk-dancing for "old maids" her age? And in such a place, where congenial groups never met together to exchange opinions in friendly conversation, how soon the little interest aroused in her by her courses in drama, and art, and current events, would starve for lack of nourishment!

"Oh, how I hate Ridgefield!" she murmured fiercely to herself. "How I hate Ridgefield!" Until that moment she didn't know she *could* detest innocent, inanimate things so heartily, such as streets, and houses, and buildings. The town-hall and the Methodist church on Main Street flashed before her vision. They were horrible buildings, depressing buildings, bilious-looking buildings painted yellowish brown. The vision, too, of the front of 89 Chestnut Street flashed before her. Its ponderous overhanging roof, ponderous cornice, ponderous windows with heavy frowning caps, and heavy sills and heavy brackets, loomed large before her. She saw the green shades in those windows pulled down tight as usual. She saw the ground-glass oval-topped panels in the double front door exclaiming "O" at her as usual, every time she turned in the driveway. She heard her mother's querulous voice, complaining as usual; her father, grumbling over expense as usual; she saw herself sitting in her prim little room as usual—growing old—growing old as usual! Oh, what would Cousin Pattie do in her place? What roundabout way of escape would Cousin Pattie discover?

Her father and Aunt Augusta had intended that Reba should return with them the following day, but



she had refused to do that. She had told them she would assume her responsibilities as daughter, but she would not assume them to-morrow, nor the next day either! There were affairs here that she owed some obligations to. They had given her no notice; she was sorry; she couldn't possibly manage to return to Ridgefield for ten days or so, she thought.

It was the next morning when Reba was dressing that she spied Cousin Pattie's scarab in a corner of her jewel-box. Her heart felt very sad and heavy after her restless night. She picked up the scarab, and let it lie a moment in her palm, then shook her head over it, and sighed. "My resurrection!" she murmured bitterly. "No use, Cousin Pattie," she whispered, and shrugged her shoulders. "A girl's first duty is to her parents," she thought. "There's no getting around that—unless she's married. And I'm not. I'm not married." She smiled crookedly, then abruptly glanced up, as if she had stumbled upon something that startled her. "I'm not married," she said outloud, and abruptly sat down on the edge of her bed, closing her hand tight over the scarab. "No. I'm not married," she told herself for the third time, her eyes round and large now.

She sat there on the edge of her unmade bed for a long time, half an hour perhaps, staring fixedly out at the gray slate-covered roofs. What if there were a prior claim upon her? Startling supposition! What if actually she were bound by law to somebody whom the very Bible taught she must cleave to and desert all others to follow? Reba did not see the roofs outside her window, as she sat and stared at them, nor the



escape-pipes puffing out cottony clouds of steam against the blue sky, nor the spinning chimney-pots. It was "Number Four" she saw, dressed in burlapish cloth, tall, and stooped, and awkward.

## CHAPTER XIV

**I**T was raining the following Sunday evening. It had been raining all day long—a steady, drenching downpour that had waked Reba in the early morning with a hollow, pattering sound on the roof outside her window. She had hoped it might clear toward evening, but when she started out at half-past seven to keep her appointment with Nathaniel Cawthorne, there was still a complaining mist and drizzle. She had not seen him since his declaration. As she hurried along the rain-drenched sidewalk, the expression upon her face, hidden by the dark shadow of her umbrella would have reminded David again of the crayon of his father at nineteen. It was a set, determined expression.

Reba had been doing some deep thinking since Aunt Augusta's unexpected maneuver. She had looked forward into the future, she had looked back into the past, and both ways she had seen before and behind her the same unvaried repetition of familiar details stretching on and on. It was as if she were standing midway on a straight piece of railroad-track traversing miles of verdureless desert, and in both directions there appeared nothing more inspiring than an endless stretch of monotonous railroad-ties and telegraph-poles, fading away to the vanishing-point. Cousin Pattie would run any sort of risk to avoid with honor such routine.

At first Reba had simply played with the idea of



marriage as a way of escape, much as Nathaniel Cawthorne simply played at first with the idea of murder as a way of escape for his mother. But every time Reba considered the possibility it set her heart to thumping with its appeal. If she should marry the stranger, then the day-in day-out invariableness of existence in Ridgefield would be relieved by the feature of uncertainty. He would be absent for three years, and after three years, when she was twenty-eight or nine would she not welcome anybody, whoever he was, who had the authority to claim her for new worlds, new scenes, new adventures? Only a husband could possess such authority. Only a husband could force Aunt Augusta's return to her old post.

Her mother preferred Aunt Augusta's ministrations to hers. It wouldn't be unkind to the invalid. She, Reba herself, would be the only one who would suffer from the results of such an act. And she *might* suffer. Of course there were risks—big risks, she supposed. But hadn't her grandfather run risks, dared, defied, hacked his way through, Cousin Pattie had said, to his success? And wasn't her own weak, trembling, inglorious parent an example of the kind of man who was dominated by doubts and fears? Reba argued that she would be sure to suffer if she meekly accepted a lifelong sentence of thankless service in Ridgefield. Perhaps a wise adviser would tell her that she would likewise be sure to suffer if she married in any such abnormal, abortive fashion. Well, possibly. Grant it. But it would be a different kind of suffering, anyway!

During the tormenting hours of indecision which

had preceded this rainy Sunday morning, Reba had asked herself more than once what could be worse, when she was old and dried, than the haunting thought that she had had a chance to escape bondage but had lacked the courage to grasp it. Oh, she would prove to herself and to Cousin Pattie, and to her grandfather, that *she* could defy and dare as well as they. She would take the offensive in life, as they had done. She, too, would plan and carry through a campaign against circumstances. She would marry her sailor friend. She would run the great risk. She would marry him before she went home. A man to whom a girl was merely engaged held no prerogative over blood relations in Ridgefield.

As Reba hurried along to meet her lover this rainy Sunday evening she tried to quench with old arguments the doubts and fears that would, in spite of her, spurt out now and then, like little sharp-tongued flames from a fire that isn't yet dead. It wasn't as if she were young, she told herself. She would never meet anybody else, who would care for her. Not in Ridgefield. She never had, and she was growing older every day. Besides it wasn't as if the seafarer's crudities grated on her. They didn't. There was probably a queer, crude, unhewn sort of streak in her. She recalled that the machine-grease that rimmed the fingernails of the freshly-scrubbed hands of the Italian whom she used to watch hadn't spoiled his fascination for her. "Nathaniel Cawthorne!" she whispered to herself once or twice. "Nathaniel Cawthorne! What a queer, unfamiliar name! Nathaniel Cawthorne—Nathaniel Cawthorne!"

He was waiting for her under a huge umbrella, be-



side the dripping horse-chestnut tree. Their greeting was awkward, embarrassed.

"Good evening," they both said, and then halted.

"I'm sorry—the seat's all wet," Nathaniel apologized, as if somehow it was his fault. "I brought a newspaper for you to sit on, but it's no use. It soaks through. I'm sorry."

"It doesn't matter."

"There's no other place for us to go, I suppose."

"No dry place, I guess. I'll tell you," Reba suggested, "I'll put my umbrella down and stand under yours; then if we move under the tree we won't get so very wet, and can talk well enough too."

They did this, and a minute later, Reba, standing very straight before Nathaniel, under the shelter he held above her, her hands clasped upon the handle of her closed umbrella, which she held on the ground, like a staff, in front of her, looked up and began, "I've been thinking about what you told me here the other night."

"Yes." He was abject, shoulders stooped, head bent. "Yes, miss, I suppose you have. Don't mind saying anything you feel like," he murmured, trying to make it easy for her. "I'm used to knocks. I shan't mind, miss."

"I wasn't quite sure," Reba went on, "just what you meant the other night."

"Perhaps," he murmured, "I better not try to explain just what I did mean. Perhaps I better slip away on my boat next week without offending you any more with my affairs. I don't want to offend you." He was making it difficult for Reba.



"You won't offend me," she assured him. "Please tell me what you meant."

"Why, I meant I wasn't just fooling with you," he murmured.

"Neither was I—with you."

"I meant," he went on, "if I was the right kind, fine and educated, you know—like you, and like your folks—I'd ask you—oh, I guess I'm sort of a fool. Tell me so. That's all you've got to do. I'd ask you—well, to be more than just friends with me."

Reba looked up at him, and said, "I'm very glad to be more than just friends with you."

"But, miss, *I* mean——" She *wouldn't* understand. He would have to come right out with it in bald words. "*I* mean—you and me being married some day."

"I thought that was what you meant," Reba told him. "It's what I mean too."

He gave a little start at that. "It's what you mean too?"

"Yes, if you want me to," she said.

"*You* will marry *me*, miss?" he asked incredulously.

"Yes." Her voice was beginning to be a little unsteady now. "If—if that was what you meant, and you still would like to have me."

He didn't reply for a second—he couldn't—just stood staring down at her. "You don't dislike me, then?" he whispered.

She gave a little nervous laugh. "Why, of course not."

"*You'll* be engaged to me?"

She nodded.

He didn't offer to touch her, but his sheltering atti-



tude—bent shoulders, bowed head, and the huge umbrella he held protectingly above her, became, somehow, a caress. “Oh, I’ll try to make myself more worthy of you, miss,” he pledged, voice trembling.

“Hadn’t you better call me by my first name?” Reba suggested.

“Rebecca,” he corrected gently. He was evidently deeply stirred. “I’ll try to become what you’d like me to be,” he went on earnestly, “and all the time I’m away, I’ll be working, and improving myself—making myself more fit and suitable for you. And when the three years are up, and I come back, if I’m not—if I’ve failed to become what you expected, I shan’t hold you to your promise—Rebecca,” he said fervently.

“Oh, but it was *my* idea,” exclaimed Reba. “I thought perhaps,” she began again, “that it might be just as well for us to be—married *before* you went away,” she brought out bravely.

“Before a week from yesterday? We sail Saturday week.”

“I think it could be managed,” she said.

“But as I am? So—so unfit for you?”

“I think it’s the safest way.” Then, candidly, “I’ve got to go back home Saturday,” she explained, “and take care of my invalid mother, and if we’re only engaged my first duty will always be there, while if we’re married—don’t you see, if we’re married—I belong to *you*.”

“To me! You belong to me!” He drew in a deep breath. “You’ll be back here bearing my name for me?”

“Well,” she hesitated over that a little, “I didn’t



know but what we better keep it secret, for a while. I didn't mean I'd tell my family just now. It would mean so much explaining—you not here, nor anything."

"Of course," he agreed. "Of course that would be the better way."

"I thought," she went on (she had it all nicely planned), "we might get married next Saturday, sometime—it takes a few days, I think, for licenses and papers and things—in the morning, perhaps, before I have taken my train for home." She stopped abruptly. "Would that—do you think that would be all right?"

"Is that the way you'd like it?"

"If *you* would. Yes, that's the way *I'd* like it."

"It's the way *I* would too, then."

There was a silence, a prolonged, significant silence, in which they were both keenly aware of a vague something that awed and frightened a little. It was Reba who broke the silence at last, a little hysterically.

"I'm sure I don't know just how one goes about doing what we're going to do—getting the papers, and making it lawful—and all that. Do you? And I don't know who to ask."

"You don't need to worry about that," Nathaniel assured her. "It's my end of the job. I'll see to that. There's a kind of clergyman fellow who's going to try a month or so of life with us on the 'Ellen T.' for his health—run down or something, I guess—and I'll ask him. He'll know. We'll have it right anyhow. I know the marriage ceremony—'solemnization of matrimony,' it's called—almost by heart," he went on. "I picked up a book, named Common



Prayer-book, once, in a second-hand book-stall in Liverpool. It's like poetry—some of it. It runs on like music in parts. Do you like that book, too, miss?" he inquired eagerly. "I mean, Rebecca?" he added.

"I never read it, I'm afraid," Reba had to confess. "It's Episcopalian, I think."

"I guess so. No doubt. Well, anyhow, the marriage ceremony is all in it. I can't make myself think you're willing to get up before a minister and say out-loud that you're willing to take me 'for better, for worse; for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health till death do us part.' But I suppose you are—I suppose I've heard right, that you are."

"Yes, I am."

"Well, then, I better take you home now. You'll be getting wet," he said.

"But hadn't you—wouldn't you like to know more about *me*, before we consider it absolutely settled?" Reba asked. "Who I am, I mean, and my folks, and all that, just as you've told me—and my age," she brought out.

"It wouldn't make any difference," he remarked quietly.

"It might. I meant to tell you right off. I'm older than you are," she confessed.

"It wouldn't make any difference," he repeated.

"I'm two years older," she told him.

"It wouldn't make any difference," he said for the third time.

Again a silence. They were embarrassing to-night—these silences, Reba thought. He stared so, and breathed so, and appeared to take it all so seriously.

"Just listen to it rain!" Reba exclaimed. Anything to relieve the tension.

"Yes. I was listening to it," gravely he replied. "I was thinking how pretty it sounded, beating on our roof," he added, "with you and me snug inside here, alone."

He made a little motion toward her, but Reba stepped back quickly—alarmed, and suddenly defensive.

"I—I think we ought to go now."

"You needn't have been afraid."

"Oh, I wasn't. I wasn't. I—I only thought it was getting sort of late."

He gave her no other chance to reprove him. They met as usual on the following Monday and Thursday nights, for their two last séances within the dimmed interior of the Garden Theater. But he did not offer to touch Reba. She sat very straight and erect in her place beside him on those two last nights. Her elbow did not rest on the chair-arm between them, and both her feet were tucked away in the dark, out of all danger of collision. The fact was, the new definiteness of their relations had made her shy and self-conscious—had made them both shy and self-conscious.

But Nathaniel's cautiousness was not wholly due to lack of confidence, or shyness either. He was very anxious not to frighten the gentle creature who had entrusted herself to him. Where another man of less fine instincts, but more polish, might have failed, the uncouth sailor succeeded in never once arousing in Reba a frenzy of doubts and misgivings, which more arduous courting would surely have done, and sent her begging to withdraw from her promise.

And yet, the five short days of their engagement



were not without their memorable moments. On Monday when they said good-night under the arc-light, a block away from the Alliance (since their relations were so soon to become a matter of secrecy, they avoided the publicity of the entrance) the sailor had said to Reba, "If you ever should feel like calling me anything—any name, I mean—not now, of course, but when it comes natural and easy, like I call you Rebecca—perhaps you'd call me what my mother used to. I'm Nat Crow at sea, you know. I'm Nathaniel Cawthorne on paper, but my mother used to call me Nathan."

"Then I will, too," Rebecca had promised.

"Thanks. Well, good-night."

"Good-night, Nathan," said Reba.

"Good-night, Rebecca," trembled the sailor.

And on Thursday night, under the same arc-light, he had lingered again. "It's all right for Saturday," he assured her. "That clergyman chap says we can come to his house and he'll do it for us, and use my Common Prayer-book. I've bought a new suit of clothes for it," he confided to Reba. "Blue serge, and," he went on eagerly, "I'm going to get you a bunch of lilies-of-the-valley at a hot-house place. That's what the clergyman fellow says is right. So you'll have things like other young ladies have them. I wanted you should. And—and—I want you to try something on," he fumbled in his breast-pocket. "I've got it here—a ring. I wanted you should have a ring, like it says in Common Prayer, even though it is going to be a secret 'solemnization of matrimony'. I've heard that most young women like a wedding-ring."



He produced a grimy piece of tissue-paper, and clumsily unrolled what was inside it, letting it lie on his large outstretched palm. It was an old-fashioned wedding-ring—a plain gold band, broad and heavy. “It was my mother’s,” he explained; “the one my own father gave her—not that brute. My own father was a good man. I thought I’d like you to have my mother’s ring. I’d like to think of you wearing it sometimes, nights, when nobody’ll see. I think my mother—she’d like to have you wear it, too. My mother used to talk to me a lot about keeping straight, and all that, for the sake of the nice refined girl I’d marry some day. I never thought she’d be so nice and refined as you, though, and I guess mother didn’t either.”

“I’ll wear it every night,” promised Reba, “and day-times on a ribbon round my neck.”

She held up her bare left hand. Gingerly he slipped the ring onto her third finger.

“Just fits!” exclaimed Reba.

“I thought your hands were just about the size of hers,” the sailor replied. “I’m never going to let them get so rough and hard-worked though. They ought to be cared for, tender, same as flowers.”

Reba smiled at that. “You talk just like a poet sometimes.”

“Well,” he replied, “when I was a kid in school, writing compositions and things, I used to think I’d like to be a poet.” He paused. “*Now* all I want to be is rich, for you.”

Reba slipped off the ring and passed it back.

“I don’t care about your being rich,” she said.

“Oh, I know what you mean. You’d rather have



me get to be an educated gentleman. Is that it? So's you won't be ashamed of me in crowds. *I* know. Well, I've got to work hard and be both for you."

"Oh, don't bother about the getting rich part," reiterated Reba.

"Just bother about getting to be educated," he said. "I see. I see. Well, I'll try." Then, after a pause, "I feel awful sorry *now* about what that Chinaman did to my hand," he added.

## CHAPTER XV

**R**EBA had attended only one wedding in her life—her Sunday School teacher's, years ago when she was sixteen. It had taken place in the Congregational Church in Ridgefield, and Reba recalled that on that occasion there had been an exchange of rings. Moreover, both her father and mother wore gold bands as a symbol of their marriage. She ought to buy a ring for Nathan, of course! It never would have occurred to her but for the lucky coincidence under the arc-light. She was thankful to have been reminded in time of so important a factor.

She went into a jewelry-shop the next day—a gorgeous place, with a phalanx of such distinguished-looking clerks behind the long plate-glass show-cases that it took about all her courage to address one of them and drained it dry when she found herself forced to explain her errand. She could feel herself pink to the tips of her ears when the young man finally assigned to look out for her (he had polished nails and white slender hands) produced a large tray of gentlemen's rings—wedding-rings, he believed she said, and asked her what size.

"I don't know exactly," she replied, confused, and picked up one of the rings—the largest she could see in one swift glance—and slipped it over her thumb. "I guess this one will do," she said. Anything to escape! "I'll take this one, if you please," she told the young man.



Reba was not without misgivings on the night before her wedding day. She wished that there was some one to whom she might go in secret and consult. Her marriage was taking on significancies that were making her apprehensive. But she didn't know how to confide in any human being. Only in prayer had she ever poured out her heart's doubts, fears, hopes and aspirations—and even then she had done so with caution.

She shrunk from mentioning even her departure until her dismantled room, the necessity of checking her trunk, and paying her bills forced an explanation. There would be sure to be questions. In her reluctance, rather than to confess to the adored Miss Park that she had been summoned back to that vague place whence she had come, Reba preferred on the third shopping-tour with her, which took place shortly after Aunt Augusta's vital visit, to make numberless useless purchases—silver-gray shoes and stockings, silver-gray gloves, a small silver-gray feather boa, all to match the silver-gray costume—jacket and gown, nearing completion now—made of soft, lavenderish gray silk, the gown daringly draped and looped over her hips, with generous bunches of it held here and there by Frenchy little bouquets of artificial heliotrope and pink rosebuds—a costume, alas, which she must hide and lay away now. She could never wear it in Ridgefield, to be discussed and talked about and head-wagged over.

Reba didn't tell any one, even Mamie, that she was going home until the very day before she went. Even then she remarked it briefly, saying it was only for a week or two. She referred to it to Miss Park for the first time on Friday, during her last noon hour of



dancing, in a non-committal little statement and in a manner that forbade questions. She said she hoped to return by late June. She could not lay bare to Miss Katherine Park the plain, homely details of her home life! Better just to slip away unobtrusively as if only for a week or two, and write an explanation later.

Miss Park had sighed over Reba's brief little announcement.

"I haven't succeeded," she confessed to Miss Bartholomew that evening, "in getting one step nearer our little Miss Jerome—not really. I've tried—tried my best, and failed. I thought for a while I was making headway, winning her confidence slowly, bit by bit, but I was mistaken. Here she is stealing away as mysteriously as she came. I don't for one minute believe she's coming back. She had such a guilty manner when she told me this noon; and when I referred to our summer plans (you know I'd asked her to help me at one of the girls' camps), she blushed and wouldn't raise her eyes. It troubles me."

"I don't see why it should, Katherine."

"I'll tell you, then. I'll confess. I'm afraid that she has used up all her money. If she has, then I'm the one to blame for it! You see, I thought I was being kind—getting close to her. She seemed so anxious to have some pretty clothes, and made me believe she had all sorts of money which she had never been taught how to spend. She asked me if I thought it was wrong—wicked, for her to buy *one* wonderful costume, no matter what it cost—just as wonderful, she said, as the most fashionable woman would wear at the most fashionable summer-resort on the Atlantic



coast. That was the way she put it, and I took her to Madame Boulangeat! She had given me to understand that money was the one thing she had in abundance—only had to sign her name—and what she wanted most in the world was to know how to exchange part of it wisely for other kinds of wealth—not only clothes, but good times, and interests. I had such plans for enriching her! I was so interested! You can't imagine how responsive she was to anything I suggested. It was like working on a canvas with every stroke of your brush inspired—true and perfect—promising you a masterpiece. Something like that. Why, I had a kind of sneaking notion that she would be one of our masterpieces! And then about a week ago, her eyes suddenly left off shining, her voice lost that little note of impulsiveness, and there was no more of that eagerness, nor pretty embarrassed enthusiasm about her. Oh, if I have helped her to squander her tiny fortune on mere clothes—if I have made such an error in judgment, then I don't deserve my position!"

"Nonsense," comforted Miss Bartholomew. "Don't worry. She probably considers her money well spent. No doubt she's going back to Skidunkville to make the impression of her life in her grand folderols."

"No," gravely Katherine Park replied, shaking her head.

"Or," suggested the resourceful Miss Bartholomew, "perhaps she's going to be married in the wonderful costume. Never can tell about these close-mouthed New Englanders—what their motives are. I'm glad I'm Pennsylvanian."

Katherine Park continued staring into space, still



shaking her head doubtfully. "Oh, dear! I hate to fail with a girl when I've tried so," she exclaimed.

Miss Bartholomew was nearer right in her chance surmise about the Boulangeat costume than she knew—nearer right than Reba herself knew. For it was not until Reba was leaning over her trunk late that Friday night, folding the gray creation safely away between layers of tissue paper in the second tray, that it occurred to her to be married in it.

She rose, went over to the window and raised the curtain. The stars were shining. It promised to be fair. Why not? And the twenty-dollar hat, too, that had never been out of the oblong room since the day of its arrival—why not christen that as well? And the gray shoes and stockings, and the feather boa, perhaps? She would never have another chance. Besides, was it not her wedding-day? Her long black dust-coat, bought long ago for the railroad journeys to the sea, would conceal her from chin to ankles as she left the Alliance, and a half-dozen blocks away she would be hidden in the blessed city crowds. Nathan had told her that he was to honor the occasion with a brand new suit of blue serge. Well, she also would come freshly dressed.

The sun shone very bright the next morning. The air was clear and cool. Nature had a sort of shining quality on the morning of Reba's wedding-day, as if it had just dipped itself in cold water and felt exhilarated. From the bits of snowy white clouds, shining bright against the clear blue sky, high up above the copings and cornices of the buildings, down to the shining plate-glass show-windows, shining brass doorplates, shining black sides of the automobiles pass-



ing close beside Reba on their way to the shopping district, there was a clean, washed look. It was a day to dispel doubts and fears of whatever nature, and as Reba hurried along that Saturday morning on her way to meet the man she was to marry, she, too, felt shining underneath the long black dust-coat.

She slipped the disguising thing off when she reached the edge of the Public Gardens, and hung it over her arm, appearing suddenly as fresh and bright as the radiant flowers in the formal flower-beds. People turned to gaze at her.

She had no idea how transformed she was. She had been able to see herself in her wedding clothes only in sections. Standing on a chair in front of her high chiffonier, she had caught a glimpse of her gray-shod feet. On the floor, tipping the mirror well forward, she had surveyed somewhat doubtfully the amazing panniers over her hips. And finally, with the mirror straightened, had caught the pouter-pigeon effect of the little short gray boa hugging the back of her neck, and the small hat tipped forward at the angle the clerk in the shop had placed it.

All the confidence with which earlier in the morning Nathan had set forth in his new blue serge, red tie, and stiff black hat, deserted him completely at sight of the modish young lady whom he spied a long way off coming to meet him. Uneducated as he was in woman's fashions, still he was acutely aware of the smartness, the loveliness too, of Reba's costume. He gazed at her in dumb admiration for a second or two.

All he said finally was, "The flowers aren't good enough," and he passed her a florist's box.

Lilies-of-the-valley—huge ones with “bells twice the size of those that grow at home in Ridgefield under the syringa bush in the clothes-yard,” she told him prettily.

He had no answer for that, no answer for anything just then. He had just noticed her feet in gray suede!

He did not speak of them—he did not speak of any of Reba’s little fineries—but she knew by his furtive glances that they were not unobserved. Of the two, she was the more at ease. She prattled almost volubly, as she tripped along beside him across the gardens on their way to be married.

The ceremony was to be performed at the home of the young clergyman who was sailing on the “Ellen T. Robinson” the following Saturday. Nathan had explained all the details to Reba at their last meeting, and already had searched out the address where the clergyman lived so that there might be no delay. The hour suggested by the clergyman had been eleven in the morning. After a conversation or two with the sailor, the clergyman could not help but feel a warm protective interest in him, and he had told him that he would ask his own mother, with whom he lived, to act as witness.

It was just two minutes of eleven when Reba and Nathan stood timidly waiting for admittance outside the plate-glass, filet-lace-covered front door of the clergyman’s residence in the Back Bay.



## CHAPTER XVI

IF Reba had struck Nathaniel Cawthorne dumb with her loveliness on that lovely May morning, she was something of a surprise to the young clergyman. He had not expected any such bride as this! And his mother, a belaced little woman, all aflutter since breakfast over such an usual event as *this* about to take place in mid-morning on a Saturday, in her yellow-brocaded drawing-room, was so upset after the arrival of the bride and groom, that she begged her son to have nothing to do with the ceremony.

She had received them in the hall as they came in, shaking hands with them both, and, to cover her surprise at the contrast between them, had twittered like an excited bird over Reba, leading her upstairs to the dainty chintz-hung guest-room, and effusively urging her to take off her things and "make herself at home." Reba blushed and hesitated over the unexpected hospitality, but she acquiesced in what seemed to be expected of her, laying her dust-coat upon the bedspread, and beside it her gray silk jacket, exposing to the clergyman's now thoroughly alarmed mother, Madame Boulangeat's triumphant panniers.

It was when Reba was in the bathroom, washing her already immaculate hands with soft, violet-perfumed soap and drying them on an embroidered bit of fine bird's-eye linen, that the clergyman's mother approached the silk jacket lying upon the embroidered bedspread, gingerly picked it up, and looked inside it.



Madame Marie Boulangeat! There was only one Madame Marie Boulangeat in Boston, and the clergyman's mother knew her well—at least she knew her to the extent of two gowns a year.

Warily she lay the jacket back upon the bedspread, hastened downstairs, called her son away from the sailor and led him into the dining-room, closing the door cautiously behind them. In little gasps, she told him what she had discovered. Surely there was something wrong—"out of the way," she expressed it, about such a nice, refined-looking girl, dressed in such a gown, marrying a big, clumsy, uneducated young man like that!

"Surely, surely, Robert, you mustn't do it. Madame Boulangeat! Oh—please, *please*, son, refuse to have anything to do with this marriage."

Robert Barton patted his mother kindly on the shoulder. "Don't you worry, mother," he said. "She may be one of the sewing-girls at your Madame Boulangeat's for all we know. Besides, I couldn't go back on the poor fellow *now*. You come along and be good."

"I don't like it. I don't like the looks of it," his mother remonstrated. "She speaks like a lady, Robert, the few times she's spoken. Oh, dear, I don't see why you allow yourself to become involved in so irregular an affair."

Robert Barton led his mother gently toward the door.

"Don't let's keep them waiting," he said, and went out into the hall.

Reba was coming down the stairs. Mrs. Barton hastened toward her protectingly.



"If I must, I *must*, I suppose," she whispered to herself, and outloud, holding out both her hands to Reba, "Come into the drawing-room, my dear," she said.

That same afternoon, from behind her silver tea-kettle, purring comfortably as usual at a five o'clock on Saturday, Mrs. Barton could talk of nothing with the two or three intimate friends who had dropped in to see her and drink a cup of her tea, but the marriage she had witnessed in the morning.

"I simply couldn't keep the tears out of my eyes. I've been to more weddings than I am years old, I suppose, but never to *one* that affected me like this. To hear the voice of that great big hulk of a young man trembling over those familiar phrases, and no music, and no flowers, and no audience but just *me*, for a background, and Norah the chamber-maid for an extra witness, and Robert there before me, so solemn and grave—well!" She shrugged prettily.

"I told Robert afterward that I just couldn't send that sweet young thing down to the train, or wherever they were going, away from my house after her wedding, on foot. So I made them come upstairs and sit down a little while here, and while we waited for the limousine to come I served them some of these little currant-cakes, though the young man wouldn't eat a thing. And I put a piece of one in a little empty wedding-cake box I had, and gave it to the bride for her to take away. And I kissed her when she went! She just won me, somehow—so modest and refined—and I told her that I hoped she'd be happy, and if she was lonely, when her husband was away on his boat, she must come and see me because I'd be lonely too,



with my son away on the same boat. I don't suppose she will, but *somehow* I'm going to find out more about her, if I have to go to Madame Boulangeat."

Nathan had never ridden in a limousine before his wedding-day, and Reba only when Mr. Joseph Horween, the general-manager of the mills at home, had picked her up, on one or two occasions as he had been passing her in his car. The sailor glanced shyly at Reba, and was struck with the harmony between her and the luxurious background. The limousine was lined with dark, purplish-colored broadcloth, and it set off Madame Boulangeat's costume like a velvet-lined box a jewel. It matched the very heliotropes in the tiny bunches of flowers that Reba wore. Everything about himself, on the other hand, clashed and swore with the purple richness. A wave of humility swept chokingly over him. Why, but for the clergyman's gently detaining hand upon his arm, in his awkwardness he would have plunged into the car in front of the girl he had just promised to love and cherish. She must have noticed! She must be aware of his utter unfitness for such an interior as this—silk-curtained and tasseled—for such dainty exquisiteness as hers! His first words alone with her after their marriage were murmured apologetically, in a low tone.

"Are you sorry you've done it?" he asked.

Reba turned steady eyes toward him. She never felt calmer in her life. The miraculous assurance of the early morning had not deserted her one whit. When she spoke her voice had a glad, defiant tone.

"I'm not the least bit sorry in the world!" she exclaimed.

For months and months Nathan fed his hungry



heart on the memory of that reply. And Reba during many of those same months, perplexed and bewildered, strove desperately to call back the wonderful moment in the limousine when, as one inspired, she was consumed with the conviction of the ultimate rightness of her marriage.

They rode in rapt silence for the rest of the little journey to the South Station, where the tactful clergyman, conscious of the sailor's hesitation when asked where the chauffeur should take him and his wife (the poor fellow had gone purple at the use of so staggering a term) immediately suggested the railroad station.

"But tell him differently if you want to, after you start," Mr. Barton had added as he stood, bare-headed on the sidewalk beside the car. "Wedding-trips are supposed to be kept a dark secret."

But they hadn't told the chauffeur differently. They had made no plans in way of a celebration. Reba's train left for Ridgefield a little after four, and she had told Nathan previously that she would have to return to her room immediately after the marriage ceremony was performed.

However, the face of a clock, which Nathan caught a glimpse of in passing, set him to wondering, uncomfortably, if he ought not to take her into a restaurant somewhere, and in view of their new relations at least eat a meal together. It was after half-past twelve. But he distrusted himself too much to run the risk of shocking her with bad table-manners! There was his crippled hand to consider too! He had refused to touch the little cakes, which the clergyman's mother had offered them, for fear of committing some sort



of awkward error. So when the automobile finally drew up to the edge of the sidewalk outside the entrance of the station, and Reba and her companion stepped out, they were both a little at a loss to know exactly what to do or say next, after they had watched the limousine disappear in the traffic.

For the first time since the solemn words of the wedding ceremony Reba felt self-conscious. She glanced up at the man beside her, then hastily away. The ring she had bought for him was still lying in the bottom of the shopping-bag she carried. How could she tell him about it here on the crowded sidewalk? She looked about her on all sides. People everywhere!

He caught her despairing expression.

"Do you want to go back to your room now?" he asked solicitously.

"I suppose I better," she acquiesced, but made no move to start.

At last, as she continued to hesitate, and glance about, "Do you want that I should see you back?" he attempted.

"Oh, no!" exclaimed Reba. "I think you better not do that! I'll just run up here and take the elevated. O dear!" she broke out, "we never have any place to talk—just sidewalks, and public benches—and there's something—" her face brightened suddenly. "Why couldn't we go into the waiting-room of the station?" she suggested.

"I don't see why we couldn't," he replied.

Before Reba sat down on one of the long, high-backed, oak benches (they found one unoccupied), she said first, instinctively protective of her new dress,



"Perhaps I better put my coat on. If you'll hold these," passing Nathan her bag, the little white box with the cake in it, and the lilies-of-the-valley.

He held them carefully, while she slipped into the long black coat, tucking all her wedding-day finery out of sight, concealing completely the smart lines of Madame Boulangeat's costume, and the feather boa, too, as she buttoned the coat up snug about her neck.

"There!" she ejaculated with satisfaction. "Now!" and took back her belongings, and sat down.

Nathan sat down too.

"You look more suited to a rough fellow like me *now*," he remarked with a sigh of relief, "though I won't be forgetting," he was quick to assure her, "those little bunches of heliotrope and pink rosebuds you wore. I always thought that the heliotrope plant my mother got to bloom for her on the sunny window-sill at home had just the sweetest, rarest, sort of most-expensive smell there was. I won't be forgetting, rough, nasty nights at sea, how like a pretty, cultivated garden you looked to-day—all neat and trimmed, and expensive, and just sprinkled, and nice-kept."

Reba gave a little embarrassed laugh. "How queerly you put things, sometimes," she said. "I don't believe anybody puts things so queerly as you." Then abruptly changing the subject, first drawing in her breath deep as if about to dive off a springboard, "The minister didn't ask *me* what symbol I had for *you*," she said, and glanced down at her hands in her lap. She had not put on her gloves, and she began turning about the broad gold band on the third finger of her left hand.

Nathan, finally comprehending, replied, "No, he

didn't. That's so. They don't in that book of mine. But it was legal," he hastened to assure her. "Mr. Barton told me it was just dead-sure legal, all right."

"Oh, yes. I supposed so," Reba replied. "Only most married couples *I* know, *both* wear wedding-rings."

"Oh, do they?"

"I wanted that you and I should be like other married people, as near as we could," she persevered, opening her bag and fumbling in its depths. "Of course," she went on, "it may not fit. I had to guess about the size, but anyhow——"

"Did *you* buy a ring for *me*?"

"Oh, it isn't much," Reba belittled, and she stretched out her hand toward him. There was a tiny little white package lying in her palm.

Nathan took the package, placed it on his knees hugged tremblingly together, produced a handkerchief, and wiped his hands; then with what fingers he possessed, proceeded to untie the red string around it—or at least to try to.

"I'll do it," offered Reba.

"Oh, thanks," he mumbled, perspiration standing out in beads upon his brow.

"It's just a plain gold wedding-ring," she explained, when, her fingers having quickly loosened the string, she lifted the cover and passed back the box with the band of gold shining inside.

He gazed down upon it in silence for a second or two.

"But I haven't got any wedding-ring finger," he murmured at last. "That Chinaman chap——"



"Oh, it doesn't matter," interrupted Reba, "which hand you wear it on, I guess. Try it on."

Very cautiously Nathan drew forth the ring, slipped it over the third finger of his right hand (the nail of even that was broken) and sheepishly glanced up at Reba when, half-way down, the gold circle stuck fast. It wouldn't pass the second joint of even his little finger! There was a moment of rueful silence.

"Oh well, then," exclaimed Reba, "give the silly thing back to me, then. It's no use as it is. It was foolish anyway to get it, I guess."

But Nathan did not give it back. He placed it in its little white velvet nest, and slipped it—box and all—into an inner pocket somewhere.

"If you wouldn't object," he said, "I'd like to wear it on a ribbon around my neck, like you're going to wear mine." He paused a second. "Right next to me," he added in an undertone.

"Oh, all right, all right," Reba replied hastily. "I don't care, I'm sure," and she stood up, blushing a little.

"Were you going now?"

"Why, yes," Reba said, avoiding his disturbing eyes, "I was. It's getting late, and I've got to change my dress."

"I don't suppose," he went on, gazing up at her, for it had not occurred to him to rise too, "I don't suppose you could just sit down, and take off your pretty hat a minute, could you?"

Reba looked surprised. It was such a curious thing to ask!

"I think it's very pretty—your hat, I mean, all gray to match everything—but I thought, if you'd just take

it off a minute, so I could just take away one more look of you—like you were at the movies when you let me—when we got acquainted, you know——”

Reba cast down her eyes.

“People would wonder why,” she objected in a low voice.

“I suppose so,” he agreed, and urged no more.

“Of course—if you want me to—but—but it seems——”

“Oh, never mind—never mind.”

Suddenly Reba sat down, raised both her hands and took off her hat with a little determined jerk. “There!” she said, all aflush.

There was an intimacy, a sweet familiarity about her bared forehead and the outline of her uncovered head that Nathan had taken deep pleasure in, in the crowded theater. His long silent contemplation of her now, as she sat bare-headed before him in the station, was his farewell caress.

“Thanks—for letting me,” he said after a moment.

Reba pinned on her hat and stood up again, Nathan rising too this time.

“Well, I guess I better run now for the elevated,” she said. “It’s getting later and later. But you needn’t come. I know the way. It’s just up those steps out there. I think you better not come.”

“All right.”

There was a pause. “Good-by,” jerkily Reba ejaculated.

“Good-by,” Nathan replied quietly, not offering even to shake hands.

Reba hesitated. Was this to be their parting? A sudden fear that the significance of their marriage had



not been deeply enough impressed upon the sailor swept over Reba. A determination to make him realize her claim upon him gripped her.

"You won't—you won't forget we're married, will you?" she asked.

He shook his head. "No," briefly he replied.

"And—and—you'll surely come back sometime, won't you?"

He nodded. "Yes."

Then, "Good-by—Nathan," she murmured, and there was a note of wistfulness in her voice, this time.

"Good-by, Rebecca," the sailor answered.

She stretched out her hand. He took it, and suddenly, unurged, of her own free will, the timid, but now resolute and desperate Reba gave the sailor both her hands.

"I'm going to be true to every word I promised at the minister's," she told him fervently.

"I'm going to, too," he said.

She lifted her face, stood on tiptoes a little—oh, she would seal that compact now without a shadow of doubt, whatever it cost. Scarlet-cheeked, "We're married, you know," she said, "and married people—when they say good-by——"

He understood at last.

"You mean—" he whispered.

"Well, don't you think we ought to?" she queried.

He leaned, and awkwardly, shyly, they kissed each other, somehow, somewhere. She turned then, and without another word nor another glance, hurried away.

## CHAPTER XVII

**I**T wasn't until the last days of October were slipping slowly through a mellow Indian summer into November that Reba felt anything but gladness and thanksgiving for the heaven-sent inspiration that had imbued her with courage sufficient to marry Nathaniel Cawthorne. The realization of the significance of her vows to the vague, distant sailor, and his to her, was a refuge she sought every time her spirit was tried and troubled, a haven of comfort, a promise of escape. Amidst all the fault-finding at 89 Chestnut Street, and ill-feeling directed toward her, Nathan's shy tributes of praise and gentle homage were precious possessions of Reba's which she would take out from their secret place, now and again, and contemplate, as jewels from a hidden box.

As sweet as victory was to Augusta Morgan she felt nothing but rancor for Reba, who had made her pay such a price for triumph. During the week or two preceding her aunts' departure for Maine, Reba endured all sorts of cruelties—long tirades on her "doings" at the Alliance, thrusts at her age, and frequent jibes at her failure to marry. She bore the hectoring in silence, much as in the past, but there was something different about her silence now. It was less meek, and sometimes the impertinent girl actually smiled, Aunt Augusta observed. When Reba smiled, it was when she felt the tiny gold weapon, that some



day she might use against Aunt Augusta, pressing against her chest underneath her waist.

Nathan, far away in his boat, plowing steadily along now toward tropical seas, need not have sighed with such frequent hopelessness over his unfitness for the dainty little silk-gowned person who had stooped to marry him, had he known to what advantage he appeared in her home atmosphere. He did not suffer in comparison with the only man with whom Reba came into close contact—her father. For David, distressed over the fast-approaching catastrophe of the all-important Augusta's departure, expressed his disgruntledness in the frequent donning of frayed and worn wearing-apparel, and soiled collars (or else, during meal-time, no collars at all), and constantly ate with his knife and snapped at his food. Nathaniel Cawthorne seemed to Reba made of finer material than her father; and his manners, beside David's, stood out as actually courtly.

Reba kept her marriage guarded very carefully. Nobody guessed, nobody surmised it, but the secret knowledge of it instilled marvelous self-confidence. In her first issue with her father, after Aunt Augusta and Aunt Emma had departed for Maine, it was the constant repetition to herself of the words, "I'm Mrs. Cawthorne! I'm Mrs. Cawthorne!" that kept her from crumpling up and submitting.

The issue had been about a hired-girl. Reba had gone to Union one afternoon, before her aunts had left, and engaged a young Swede to come and help her with the housework. She did not tell her father what she had done until the day Hedwig was due to arrive.

"I'm going to pay her wages," she explained.



"Wages!" her father stormed. "Wages! As if that was all! It's what the creatures waste—waste—throw away into the swill for the pigs! I know—oh, I know! And I'll have to pay for that, won't I? Hired girl! I won't have a hired-girl in this house!"

"But, Father," Reba replied, "you don't expect *me* to cook, and clean, and nurse, and do *everything*, do you? Why, how could I ever go out unless there was some one here to leave with mother? You've got to be reasonable."

"Reasonable! Do you know who you're talking to? You'll do as *I* say as long as you sleep and eat your victuals under my roof." He actually shook a menacing fist at Reba.

She had never seen him like this. He had not dared to resist Aunt Augusta. But, "He can't hurt me, he can't hurt me," Reba told herself. "I'm beyond him now. I'm Mrs. Cawthorne. I'm Mrs. Cawthorne." And outloud she said calmly, "No, Father, I don't think I *will* do as you say. Of course I can go away," she went on, "if you prefer, but as long as I choose to stay here, and you choose to have me, I'm going to use my own judgment about things a little."

Whatever timid hope Reba had entertained that alone with her parents they might find some basis of companionship, it disappeared after a week or two. Try as she might, she could not reach either of them—her mother even less than her father. Nothing was right that she did for the invalid. Time and again her mother would struggle pathetically with shawl, or piece of clothing, rather than allow Reba to help her. Reba seemed to grate on her mother's nerves. She was aware of the invalid's illy concealed recoil from



her touch even before some clumsiness on her part called forth the impatient, "Oh, go away, go away. I'll do it myself somehow or other."

Whenever Reba stole out for an hour of air and exercise, leaving Hedwig in charge, her mother accused her of heartlessness. Whenever she stayed in, sitting long persistent hours by the western window in her mother's room, she was made aware of what a dull companion she was. Reba was not talkative by nature, and the invalid missed sorely the bits of gossip that her sisters used to pick up, and their savory comments.

"If you're going to sit there like a stone statue, I might as well be here alone, I guess," she would complain, and the ready tears of self-pity would start. "O dear, dear," she'd wail. "Here I am sick and helpless, and in terrible pain, robbed of my two only sisters. And it's your fault—all your fault," she'd accuse. "They were the only comfort I had! O dear, dear."

Reba had never had any experience before in the personal care of the invalid. Aunt Emma had always dressed Eunice, bathed her, brushed her hair, and taken complete charge of her at night, sleeping on a cot in one corner of the room. Reba wished her mother would be a little more patient with her in her awkward handling of basin, washcloth, and hairbrush. She would learn in time. But no—always criticism, always irritation, always tears at last. It seemed to Reba that her mother's wrinkled cheeks were never dry. Reba's nights spent on the cot in the corner of her mother's stiflingly close room (open windows caused draughts) were constantly interrupted by de-



mands—to see if “that girl” in the kitchen had got in yet, or if the back door was surely locked, or the back-hall light out; or to turn back a blanket, or get an extra one, or fill the hot-water bag, or mix a pinch of soda in half a glass of boiling water. It was a difficult summer for Reba. She grew pale under the strain of it.

But the hardships she was called upon to bear were trivial as compared to the demands of Aunt Augusta’s self-imposed task. Many a night, lying wide awake in Syringa Rand’s bare, carpetless north bedroom in the broken-down wooden bed, which no second-hand furniture dealer had thought worth carting away, Augusta and the long-suffering Emma by her side longed dumbly for the comforts and security of 89 Chestnut Street. Syringa’s manner of living proved to be cruder than Augusta remembered. The distance from well to kitchen-sink longer; the care of one horse, a cow, and a dozen or so hens more arduous than she supposed, but with Spartan-like severity, she told herself that a little extra work couldn’t hurt her. Secretly, she dreaded keenly the approaching winter months, snowbound in the denuded old farm-house, and was in constant terror of the creature—half beast, half man—who shook hairy fists at her every time he saw her and had to be kept behind closed doors. But so long as the reasons which she had given out to Reba, and to her little world in Ridgefield, for undertaking this self-sacrificing task existed, so long, it seemed to her, she must stay by it. No self-respecting woman could abandon a mission of mercy, as broadly advertised as hers had been, simply because it proved disagreeable.



It was the intervention of heaven that released Augusta finally, and at the same time loosed Emma's chains, mercifully flung wide all closed doors for poor Joey Rand, dried Eunice's tears, solaced David, and gave to the unexpecting, unhoping Reba freedom again.

Reba was sitting in her room when her father, one noon, shoved open the door and came in.

"There won't be any need of that hired-girl any more," he exclaimed. "You can tell her to clear out to-morrow. Things are going to be different around here now. There's going to be an end to all this nonsense."

Reba sighed. Must there be more struggle?

"How are you going to manage it, Father?" she asked.

"Oh, you don't think I know what I'm talking about," he replied with some heat. "You don't think that creature downstairs *has* got to clear out. Well, I do! And she *has*—she *has*, I tell you. Read this—read this!" He thrust a letter into Reba's hands.

She lifted it wonderingly. It was from Aunt Augusta. David watched her gloatingly as she drew forth her aunt's letter and unfolded it.

"Oh, how awful!" were her first words.

Dead! Joey Rand dead! And such a death! He had thrown himself out of a second-floor window! Aunt Augusta had seen him, was passing, in fact, just beneath the window on her way to feed the hens. "Joey ought to have been in an asylum anyhow; then such a thing wouldn't have happened." Reba reached the end of the first page and turned the letter over. "But seeing," Aunt Augusta continued, "it *has* happened, and Emma and I have seen Joey safely across,



as we have so many other relations before him, we feel our mission in Machias is completed. We have been a great help and comfort to poor Syringa during her hour of trial, and we both feel we have done the job heaven sent us to do, as well as we could. We are ready now, with clear consciences, to take up again our duties in Ridgefield, and we are coming back to poor Eunice just as soon as Syringa can arrange her affairs.

"For," the letter calmly announced, "we are bringing Syringa with us. She hasn't got any folks but us, and it isn't decent to leave her alone up here, even if her farm hadn't got to be sold for the taxes, which it has. She's the best worker I ever saw. Can do anything there is to do around a house (and barn, too, for that matter), understands nursing invalids from the ground up, and is one of the smartest washers and ironers I ever knew. Tell Reba to tell Mrs. O'Brien we won't need her to wash and iron any more for us after Syringa comes. Syringa's a find. No wages—and a little pension of her own, coming in every year, to dress on and for pin-money. Just her meals will be the only expense to you, David. Tell Reba to dismiss that foreigner she's got in the kitchen, and to get 'the girl's room' ready for Syringa. Reba will stay right in her own room, same as usual. Syringa is used to things plain and simple. Tell Eunice I'll wait and tell her about the funeral when we come. Joey made a nice looking corpse though, after they'd got his beard shaved and his hair trimmed right."

Reba skipped the rest of the details. Joey dead! Aunt Augusta coming back! Aunt Augusta coming back to 89 Chestnut Street! She raised her eyes and



looked out of the window. What did it mean? What did it mean to *her*? Oh, she mustn't jump to conclusions, but didn't it mean—surely didn't it mean the precious little room again up among the chimney-pots and sky-lights?

## CHAPTER XVIII

**I**T was when Reba Jerome no longer required her marriage as an escape that it swooped down upon her as a possible yoke and restriction. When Aunt Augusta returned from Machias, she assumed toward Reba, a "do-as-you-please," "I-wash-my-hands-of-you" manner, which left Reba wonderfully free. Again established in the little oblong room up among flat, pebble-strewn roofs, the city, with all its hidden ecstasies and buried treasures again hers, Reba's marriage, which a few weeks ago had been balm and soothing salve, became a nettle—a tiny sliver, beneath her flesh, reminding her of its presence now and again with a little sharp, surprising, needle-like prick.

She had married the strange man of the sea for freedom, and freedom was hers without him! The sailor's gold ring, hidden, here in Boston, in a deep corner of the top tray of her hump-backed trunk (Mamie had such seeing eyes) became a symbol of vague foreboding and alarm. Back again in the inspiring atmosphere of class-rooms, reaching out to untried joys, Miss Katherine Park once more her high and shimmering ideal, the sailor—stoop-shouldered, shuffling, ill-at-ease, hiding his big red hands in his baggy coat-pockets, fell across Reba's shining path like a shadow.

"But never mind, never mind," she told herself, shutting her eyes tight to the shadow. "No use cross-



ing bridges." There were three years yet in which she might stretch her untried wings and fly.

She returned to her place in the various classes at the Alliance, with a dogged determination to make the most of each precious day; in spite of forebodings, to sample every interest and harmless pleasure that the city had to offer, even if the query, "Should a married woman go adventuring?" did prod her every now and then. Life had never seemed so rich, so full of possibilities as it did to Reba that Indian summer when she returned to Boston. The Indian summer of her own life enveloped her in its glowing warmth, the very consciousness of the brevity of the rare season of postponed youth, making her live each day with intensity.

It was an arousing and awakening period for everybody, for it was the fall of 1914 during the first October of the Great War that Reba came back to the city groping again for a broader outlook and a clearer vision.

In Ridgefield the war had seemed a far-away, remote thing to Reba, incomprehensible, as all foreign affairs had always seemed to her. The minister at the Ridgefield Congregational Church had made several references to it, and in his long prayer, every Sunday morning since August first, had asked that the rulers of Europe might be wisely guided in their disturbed affairs. But those disturbed affairs had not concerned Reba. A difference of opinion way over there across the Atlantic Ocean couldn't hurt her any more than one of those awful earthquakes one reads about every so often burying some unheard-of community on the other side of the globe. The sealed-up



pools of dark, still water lying here and there among the quiet hills of Ridgefield, Massachusetts, were scarcely rippled by the cannon-boom and bomb-fire of the early weeks of the European War. Reba, like many of her isolated New England sisters that summer, sitting late afternoons in their low rockers, their sewing laid aside a moment while they read of the far-away tramping of armies across neutral Belgium (few of the horrors of that march had filtered through then), of the menacing advance upon Paris, of the battle of the Marne, felt no shock or alarm.

Why, Reba had never heard of Marne! Where was it, anyway? Didn't know how to pronounce it. Nor Joffre either—town or man, whichever it was. It would come out all right somehow, she guessed, as, with a little listless sigh, she lay aside the local newspaper and resumed her desultory sewing. Things usually did.

It surprised Reba to hear the city buzz of the war, like a disturbed beehive. She heard it discussed everywhere—on street-cars, in elevators, restaurants, from behind ribbon-counters, in the subway. It might have been a catastrophe taking place around the next corner, in a spot familiar to them all. Reba was secretly ashamed of her placid attitude, and before she had been a week in Boston stole away to the public library to study maps and boundaries, and inform herself upon the confused early details of this thing over there, which to her wonderment was reaching out its long arm and actually touching *her*!

It was Miss Park who made Reba really feel the war. Miss Park was like one inspired that fall. She made the struggle over there an intimate thing to all



the girls and women who attended her Monday-night talks in the Alliance's parlors. She made personalities pulsing and alive for Reba out of those distant countries, which a few weeks ago had been mere names in a history-book to her—irregular, pastel-shaded shapes on a geography map, which Miss Billings used to make her bound and name the chief exports of. It was Miss Park who made out of England something big and strong, like an older brother, sternly protective of the weak and persecuted; of France something inspiring and lovable—like a younger brother perhaps—fun-loving but ready at the first call, smiling but steady in the face of terrific odds; of Belgium, little Belgium, something bleeding, suffering, in distress—a child lost, a child blinded, a child with both hands cut off! Oh, Reba shuddered, felt the horror at last. She, Rebecca Jerome, admired, loved and pitied vague masses of people she had never seen!

Aunt Augusta scornfully remarked at the end of Reba's fourth Sunday-letter home (she wrote, as before, persistently every week), "Reba's putting on great airs—presuming to get heated up over this war-business. She knows about as much about it, I guess, as a cat! There'll be no living with that girl. She thinks she's being pretty smart, I suppose, with her exclamation-points about Belgium and France!"

But even though Reba did use an exclamation-point or two when she wrote home about the war, it did not obliterate her interest in her own personal pursuit. She was still consumed with eagerness for her own small adventure. Reba Jerome developed no sudden quixotism, no extravagant passion to throw herself into the world-struggle. Her interest in the war was



really a very timid interest. But the effect of it was as good for the growth of her soul as the breaking-up and working-over of caked earth around the roots of a growing plant.

In spite of the fact that nature had finished with Reba's stature, contour, and features long since, still some sort of late loveliness bloomed upon her during that first fall of hers in Boston.

"Like green apples, picked and put down in a dark cellar before they're ripe," said Katherine Park to Louise Bartholomew one day. "Take them out in December and leave them in the sun a little while and they'll mellow up."

Whether it was the effect of the gymnasium classes, or the swimming lessons, or the dancing, or all three together, there developed in Reba a certain ease and grace of motion that had been lacking from the restrained, self-conscious carriage of a year ago. The same trace of freedom, too, became obvious, though less so, in her speech and manner.

Her clothes more than anything showed defiance of the old subjection. Not that they became bold or surprising. They didn't, happily. They suited the retiring nature of her temperament perfectly. This was not the result of any innate sense of harmony in Reba. It was simply because she lacked sufficient self-confidence to rely upon her own judgment. She shrank from approaching the sophisticated clerks in the shops, and feared that this late craving of hers for pretty things might lead her into making ridiculous selections, which it probably would have done. So instead she put herself into the hands of a single expert and trusted herself implicitly to her, scarcely,



inquiring the prices of the lovely pastel-shaded materials she recommended. Reba adopted the dressmaker whom Miss Park suggested with as little question as she did her idol's dentist, doctor, hair-dresser, and bank.

The dressmaker this second time was not, however, Madame Boulangeat. The war had detained the Madame indefinitely in France. ("To my disgust," the clergyman's inquisitive little mother had exclaimed one rainy October day, after a fruitless journey to Madame's closed shop. "I'll never find out about that mysterious little bride now, I suppose, unless I go and look her up in some horrid office, and that is so conspicuous. Robert writes that the groom is talkative about everything except his bride's identity.")

Physical exercise and artistic raiment did do a lot, of course, to bring out Reba's hidden charms; but the knowledge that she was succeeding in her peculiar enterprise, in spite of appalling obstacles—such as age (she was twenty-six now) and disapproval (Aunt Augusta still sniffed) and marriage finally—filled her with a flaming courage that would have beautified her, even if she had kept on tightly pompadouring every morning and crimping on hairpins every night.

Reba had received only three messages from Nathan up to the time of her unexpected return to Boston. These had been postcards, and had been addressed to Mr. James Perkins, President of the Ridgefield Trust Company.

Before their separation Reba had told the sailor to address all communications to Mr. Perkins, for ever since her first call upon the bank-president, Mr. Perkins had shown a disposition to champion her; had



written her conniving letters of instruction, unknown to her father, explaining how to make out checks, and properly balance amounts. Reba had not confided her marriage to Mr. Perkins, but she had presumed upon his partisanship to the extent of intrusting him with a blushing confession of the existence of a correspondent whom she didn't wish her family to know about. And he had winked an understanding eye at her, and assured her three times over that she could trust him not to let the cat out of the bag.

The three postcards from Nathan addressed to Mr. James Perkins had been unsigned and non-committal. The first, a picture of the Singer tower, mailed in New York, had remarked briefly, "This is a fine city." The second, from Savannah, "Stopping here for an extra cargo." And the third, which depicted an alligator, a bunch of bananas, and a small negro boy in rags, had been as impersonal as its predecessors. "This is what grows down here," it had said.

It had not been until Reba had received the sailor's first letter that she realized how vital their marriage was to him. And that, unfortunately, was not until after it had lost its particular significance for her. Nathaniel Cawthorne's first letter to his bride filled her with fears that required all the new courage that she possessed, to stifle, crush down deep in her heart, and calmly continue on her way.

This letter had not reached her until she had been installed for over a month at the Alliance. Mr. Perkins had forwarded it to her from Ridgefield, inclosing it first in one of the bank's official envelopes. It had required four cents in postage, for Nathan had buried his letter to Reba inside three envelopes. The



outside envelope was addressed to Mr. James Perkins, the second to Miss Rebecca Jerome, with "Private" in one corner, and the third to Mrs. Nathaniel Hawthorne. What with the bank-envelope to open in addition, when Reba finally drew forth the thin double sheet of note-paper on the inside with Nathan's writing on it, it reminded her of the tiny kernel of solid wood at the center of a certain Chinese wooden egg, which she was allowed to play with Sunday afternoons when she was a child—a marvelous toy containing a diminishing series of brightly-striped wooden shells, fitting nicely, one inside the other.

"My dear Rebecca," Nathan began. "This is the second letter I ever wrote to a young lady, and the first one was to you, too, that night after that time at the movies." Reba glanced inside the folded note-paper. It was quite a long letter. What would it all be about?

"I hope," it went on, "you will excuse all mistakes and blots and bad writing."

There wasn't a single blot, and the writing was neat and uniform. Reba could see that, in order to keep his lines straight, he had first ruled the note-paper in pencil and afterward erased the marks.

"I am well," it informed her, "and I hope you are well too. I hope this finds your mother better. I hope my postcards reached you. New York is certainly a fine city."

Beneath this sentence there appeared two unerased pencil lines and beneath them, in purple ink (he had started out in black), began a new paragraph, well indented.

"I began this," he explained, "a week ago, but



stopped because I didn't know what would please you most for me to write. Perhaps you'd like to know about the books Mr. Barton told me to get. I got them in Savannah, and am reading them outloud to him, so I'll get to pronounce words the way the man who wears your ring should. Rebecca, there never was any piece of gold meant so much as that to me. That college money under the shed didn't mean so much. I showed it to Mr. Barton. He's a fine fellow. We talk a lot. He tells me how to make myself more worthy of wearing your ring. Rebecca, it doesn't seem true—all that's happened between you and me. Nights when I lie in my dark hole below, smelling strong of kerosene oil from a smoky lantern, and creaking as the old 'Ellen T.' rises and falls, and listen to the snores of two big greasy Portuguese next to me, I just think you and your pretty white kid gloves aren't true, and then I feel around on the ribbon round my neck till I find the ring, and then I know it has really happened, and that we really have said good-by like married people do. And holding your ring like that I get to thinking of you. But not there. I take you out, Rebecca, where it's clean and sweet, underneath the stars, where we can be alone, like at the movies. Sometimes you're in your white ruffles, like when we played checkers, and sometimes you've got your gloves off and you're in your bare hands, like that time at the movies, and sometimes I see your little slender ankles, gray and velvety and delicate like a deer's up in the Maine woods. And I see your hat off, and your uncovered forehead, and it just seems as if I couldn't stand it any more. And I get up and walk and walk, and wish I was like



Mr. Barton for you, with an education like his, and money like his, and a purple automobile to let you ride in like his, and just church-like thoughts like his, when I get to thinking of you at night, Rebecca."

Another ruled pencil line interrupted the letter here. Reba was glad. It gave her a chance to rest a second and get her breath. She was glad, too, that the letter continued in black ink. There was something about the very color of the purple sentences that was disturbing.

"I began this a month ago," it went on, "but I was afraid it might not please you, and I want to please you. But it's like this, we made a port unexpected, and I've got a sudden chance to send a letter ashore, in a hurry, to catch a boat going north, so I hope you'll excuse all mistakes in spelling and grammar, and different ink. The black ink was Mr. Barton's fountain pen, and the purple was some I got from the first mate, late one night when I got to thinking of you about midnight. Please excuse my putting Mrs. Cawthorne on the envelope, if it offends you. I didn't think any one would see it, and I want you to know I think of you like that sometimes, if you don't object.

"And hoping this finds you well, I remain

"Your husband,

"NATHANIEL CAWTHORNE."

Reba read this letter three times in all, and afterward sat long in her chair staring fixedly out the window at a merrily spinning chimney-pot, while the dim, vague specter of her marriage swooped round about her.

Who was this strange man, anyhow, who signed

himself as her husband, Nathaniel Cawthorne? And what would he do to this life of hers that had become of late such a precious possession? He had not seemed strange, nor menacing either, in Ridgefield. But here—*here*—oh, what would Miss Katherine Park think if she guessed that she was married? What would Miss Katherine Park think of this Nathaniel Cawthorne who wore her ring around his neck in that black dirty hole at night, and thought purple-inked thoughts of her?

Reba pushed the letter into the front of her waist at last where no one could see it, and went into the darkening streets. She walked for a long while, an hour or so perhaps, and before returning venture-somely passed by the filet-lace-covered door in the Back Bay, as if to prove to herself that it could not harm her, that she was not afraid. Inside the house, no doubt, was the little fluttering bird-like lady who shared her secret, and possibly the young minister himself who had legalized her marriage had returned by this time (she had no idea at what port he intended leaving the sailor's boat) and was sitting upstairs in that pretty upper room where she, less than a year ago, had sat herself, warmed by the conviction that the step she had just taken had been both wise and courageous. Oh, well! Never mind! She flung up her head defiantly.

"It was only a few words," she said to herself. "I won't let a few words spoil my life. I will live, now I've got the chance. I just *will*. The burdens Cousin Pattie couldn't get rid of she put in a pack on her back, like Christian in *Pilgrim's Progress*, and went right along."



And back in her room again, Reba buried the envelope bearing the title of Mrs. Cawthorne deep in her trunk along with the postcards, and the gold ring, and the bit of currant-cake in the borrowed wedding-cake box, and sat down and wrote to Nathan on her pale blue note-paper.

She had written to him punctually every month since he had left her. A pack of her blue envelopes awaited him in San Francisco. Reba's letters were neat little models of propriety. Even her early notes to her seaman husband, when she had felt such gratitude and appreciation, were stilted and impersonal. Reba had never been taught how to set her thoughts free on paper. The note she wrote in answer to Nathan's letter made scant reference to his intimate thoughts of her. It was in a brief postscript after she had signed her name as usual, "So good-by. Rebecca," that she suggested that they keep their marriage a secret, not only from the *world*, but from *themselves*, until they were a little better acquainted—that is, if *he* thought well of it. It seemed so funny, she said, to be called Mrs. Cawthorne by him, when nobody knew anything about it around here.

It was in December when Reba wrote the note telling Nathan of her return to Boston and adding the shy suggestion at the end. All winter no message of any sort came from him. It was early spring when finally a postcard announced the safe though, owing to various mishaps, the delayed arrival of the "Ellen T. Robinson" in San Francisco.

The postcard was followed a week later by a reply to Reba's postscript. Nathaniel Cawthorne, sensitive to the slightest suggestion from the delicate creature

who had stooped to him, had replied, "I savvy about its being a secret between you and me, as well as between us and the world. All right, if that's the way you'd like it. I guess I catch on, and you won't have cause to remind me again, I hope." Then to prove to her how sincere was his intention, "San Francisco is a fine city," he went on; and the rest of the letter, even to the, "So good-by. Nathan," was so like Reba's own blue notes in everything but color and handwriting that at the end of it she whispered to herself softly, hopefully, "Oh, perhaps it will be all right, after all. With him always following the sea, and me always here. So many miles between! He must be as far as the South Sea Islands by now! So far off! Oh, perhaps we can keep it a secret for years and years—longer than just three. Perhaps for *always*, if we both want to!" suddenly it flashed across her.



## CHAPTER XIX

AND it might not have been impossible for Reba to have carried her secret concealed to her grave if her path had continued simple and straight and un-deviating. There are plenty of women who succeed in keeping their mistakes hidden in the dark deep recesses of their souls, with the world never the wiser. Nathaniel Cawthorne was not the kind of man to insist upon legal claims, and Reba's life in the city was not one that offered complications as far as her marriage was concerned. She was surrounded by women on all sides—lived, worked and played with them. Her activities as an Alliance secretary (for such she became at last) thrust before her few opportunities for meeting men on a social basis, and she shrank now from seeking opportunities. That, however, was no great hardship for Reba. As much as she still deplored the meagerness of her knowledge of the opposite sex, it was a relief to her that she possessed so justifiable an excuse for avoiding men as her marriage.

It was during her second autumn in the city that Reba was offered a position at the Women's Alliance. She did not seek it. It had never occurred to Reba that she possessed qualities useful to an organization like the Women's Alliance. She drifted into her officialdom. But it was none the less precious to her. No secretly ambitious man ever drifted into a high

position with more inward joy than Reba acquired her modest desk in the Alliance's office.

The whole course of events that led up to that desk was a series of intoxications to Reba Jerome. From the early spring day when Miss Park first asked her to help her with the beginners at the noon dancing classes ("You know the steps so well yourself now," she had explained) all along through the following requests, from this secretary and that, to help in little ways here and there,—it didn't matter how simple and trivial the assistance rendered was, Reba was as childishly pleased as a debutante who finds herself in constant demand. First it was Miss Park asking her to help with the dancing; and then Miss Bartholomew wondering if she would mind calling the roll at gymnasium drill; some other secretary requesting her to attend to the telephone during a congested morning hour in the office; and still another placing her inside the cashier's cage in the cafeteria one noon—that is, if she had nothing else very important to do just then. Reba performed these little services tremblingly at first, but with growing assurance as they mysteriously increased week by week.

The day that Miss Park asked Reba if she would not like to become one of the Alliance's real helpers, "with a big H, I mean, and a little salary," she tucked in, Reba's cup of joy flowed over.

"Me? Oh, do you think I could be of any help—any *use—really?*" Reba had gasped, blushing over the presumption of her question.

"Why, you are already," had smiled back Miss Park. "You'd just be filling officially a position you've created for yourself around here, my dear, these last



few months by being so willing and ready to help any and all of us. Your office will be sort of general First Aider to whatever disabled department needs you. Do you see? Sort of official Filler-in," explained Miss Park. "Naturally, you'll have to give up the Alliance's courses you're taking, and those at the Art Museum" (for Reba had availed herself of opportunities outside as well as inside the Alliance), "but aren't you over-coursed by this time, my dear? Still," Miss Park shrugged and turned away, "you may not care to try it. It will take up most of your time." Then abruptly turning back, "How does it sound?" she asked point-blank.

"Like the ending of a fairy-tale!" exclaimed Reba, eyes shining.

"How pretty she can look!" thought Katherine Park.

A week later Reba was given her desk—a small, flat-topped affair, with a telephone on it, and over it a thrilling little piece of shellacked oak with "Miss Jerome" painted on it in clear black letters. It was difficult to believe that the competent-appearing young woman with the quiet unself-assertive manner seated beneath that small oak shingle was the same embarrassed, painfully ill-at-ease wisp of scared femininity who but a short eighteen months before, tightly pompadoured and primly dressed, had slunk timidly around the edges of the Alliance's class-rooms and parlors. Responsibility brought out latent qualities in Reba, as Katherine Park had persuaded the Board of Managers it might. Her shy, retiring manner still clung to her, of course—always would. She colored whenever a stranger approached her desk; and had to swal-



low and fight for composure whenever any one made an unexpected inquiry.

But the defenses she built up about this supersensitiveness of hers were probably the secret of her success. For to avoid the discomfort of unfamiliarity with any feature of her position, she studied diligently every detail of it. And it wasn't long before she established for herself a reputation for accuracy and thoroughness. Also her determination to conquer her diffidence, to overcome her quailing dread of conspicuousness, demanded that she never beg off from any service asked of her, howsoever difficult.

Katherine Park was very proud of the results of her suggestion to the Board of Managers. And she was not the only one proud of Reba either.

Aunt Augusta had sniffed, true enough, at the painted sign, and grunted, "Humph," at sight of the desk and telephone before which she found her niece seated, when she and Cousin Syringa dropped in on Reba at the close of one of Augusta's rare Boston shopping-days. "To find out," she told Reba dryly, "what nonsense they'd find her up to *this* time." But Reba learned later that Aunt Augusta had not been wholly displeased. Mr. James Perkins told Reba not long after her aunt's call that he overheard her say to Lena Hanscome's mother, after Wednesday evening meeting one night, that she thought it was real nice about her Lena's getting the assistant librarian's position down in Union, and, by the way, had she happened to hear yet about their Reba's being a general secretary at the Women's Alliance in Boston?

"A general secretary! Oh, Mr. Perkins!" Reba had



replied. "I'm only a kind of general-utility-office-girl."

"Never mind, never mind, never mind," he had smiled. "*I won't tell.*"

Reba would have been satisfied to have remained general-utility-office-girl, but the eagerness she showed for her little job, and the diligence she put into it were sure to bear fruit sooner or later.

In the spring preceding her appointment to an official position, the Women's Alliance had begun to take part in the Red Cross activities of the city. It offered courses in First Aid, Home Nursing, Surgical Dressing, etc., to its members at a reduced fee, and lately had opened a Red Cross sewing-room.

When in the early winter Miss Ellsworth, the General Secretary of the Women's Alliance, found it necessary to place some one in charge of the increasing responsibilities of this department, she looked over her corps of helpers and, summoning Miss Park one day to her office, asked her how she thought Miss Jerome would do. Did she not possess the very qualifications most essential? She had taken all the Red Cross courses herself, and had passed them with high credit; had sewed endless hours at the Red Cross headquarters, and had proved expert and conscientious with both scissors and needle. Of course there would be night work. Many of the Red Cross classes met in the evening and some one would have to be on hand to take responsibility, but, as she roomed at the Alliance, she would not feel the pressure of this as much as some one who lived at a distance.

The result of that talk was that Rebecca Jerome found herself re-installed at another desk, in another



room, a fortnight later—happy and proud, but palpitatingly fearful that she would prove incompetent, unworthy of the increase in her small salary. Not that she cared about the increase for itself, for money was the last thing she needed, but a salary was proof of usefulness, and increase of salary was proof of growth.

Reba's whole soul was wrapped up now in her work. She thought of Nathan, of course, sometimes; wrote to him too, once in a while, but his less and less frequent messages, mailed from strange ports she had never heard of, dwindling finally to scarcely more than a "Dear Rebecca," and a "Good-by. Nathan," with a few stilted lines between, "hoping that she was well, as he was," portended nothing immediately frightening. The three years of freedom were fast passing. That was true. But in a recent message from Nathan he had intimated that the three years might be prolonged by another twelve months—that is, unless she particularly wanted him to return sooner. He could manage it easily, but would it make any difference to her? He would like to know (he repeated that), "Would it make any difference to you, Rebecca?"

Reba replied, by return mail, that it wouldn't make the slightest difference. There was no reason at all for him to hurry back.

Her once vital issue with her home people was also of less importance to Reba. She tried to spend a Sunday occasionally with them, but those Sundays were not very pleasant. Reba grew more and more intolerant of what seemed to her their confined lives and narrow outlooks. They persisted in criticising her to her face, however reconciled they might have become



inwardly. And her father's miserliness affected her with growing impatience.

More than once after a Sunday in Ridgefield Reba would fiercely declare to herself after her return, "I won't get like him! I won't!" And the next morning the various war charities about Boston would receive an influx of mysterious one-hundred to five-hundred dollar money-orders, "From a friend." And Reba, safe back again among her precious responsibilities and blessed round of daily duties, would silently say to herself, "Oh, I'm so glad to be here! It would kill me to have to live in the stifling atmosphere of Ridgefield now."

## CHAPTER XX

THE doctors who instructed the classes at the Alliance were young practicing physicians of the best training and reputation in the city, and they offered their services to the Red Cross Society without remuneration. Reba had been in awe of them at first. For a week or so she invariably selected a certain button on their waistcoats to gaze at before she replied to their requests or inquiries, as they stood expectant before her desk, as if by keeping her eyes steadfast she could thereby control her voice and manner. Rarely did her eyes sweep their faces, and only when her glance was on a journey somewhere else—to reference book, clock, or insisting telephone.

She knew the doctors' names, but she hadn't the courage to use them. They "Miss Jeromed" her repeatedly.

"O Miss Jerome, will you send some arm-splints and bandages to room 20," or, "Miss Jerome, messenger-boy, please, to resuscitate," or "Miss Jerome, be so kind as to call the roll for me, will you?"

Reba wished with all her heart that she might reply in the same easy off-hand manner, but she couldn't. Words stuck. Her answers were always brief, "Yes," and, "Certainly," or "Very well."

But beneath that short businesslike air of hers, which many a man would mistake for indifference, her heart was hammering and pounding a half a dozen times an evening. She experienced the keenest delight at



being addressed by these fine young professionals in such free and friendly fashion. Her delight at first was a vague, conglomerate thing, no more alarming than the pleasure she had felt, still did feel, over recognitions from her women associates. It was not until one of the doctors abruptly stood out from the others, separate and distinct, that the cause of the hammering and the pounding became a definite enough thing for her to build air-castles upon.

Dr. Booth was very popular among the members of his Red Cross classes. Young—thirty-five or so—close-cropped mustache, tall and spare, with a tautness of manner and speech that betokened an oversupply of high-strung nerves held in rigorous control. And behind the curt, crisp bearing a fascinating inconsistency. For Dr. Booth, however imperious and severe he might appear when lecturing, was never anything but kind and considerate to the girls and women in his classes when he asked them questions, even if the answers were lacking in comprehension.

He appeared an aristocrat—every inch of him—to the members of his classes at the Women's Alliance. He was always scrupulously dressed. The heavily-wrought, little-finger seal-ring on his right hand (they were gentleman's hands—nicely manicured), the watch, strapped about his bony wrist, made him a subject of frequent discussion and admiration.

Reba, of course, had observed Dr. Booth—the wrist-watch, seal-ring, the black opal scarf-pin (she always did observe such details about a man), but not until the night that he summoned her to his classroom, near the close of one of his lectures, was he of any



more interest to her (or *much* more, anyway) than the other half-dozen doctors on her record-book.

"Would you be so kind, Miss Jerome," he had asked her in his quick crisp manner that night, approaching her desk where she sat knitting, "as to come to Room 20 and allow me to demonstrate on you a moment? I won't keep you long."

"Certainly," replied Reba.

"My pupils, none of them seem inclined to volunteer, though I could have managed any one of them easily enough," he explained, once back in his lecture-room.

One of the pupils tittered at that, and all of them smiled. Reba glanced with questioning eyes around the little group of half a dozen women gathered about the demonstration-bed. This class was composed of older women—ten or a dozen rather solidly built matrons, who had formed their own group and applied for an instructor. There was not one of them present to-night who weighed under one hundred and seventy-five pounds.

"Will you please lie down on the bed, Miss Jerome?" asked Dr. Booth. "I am going to lift you."

Reba swallowed at that, but made fast a hairpin or two, then obeyed; sitting down first on the edge of the high hospital bed, tucking her skirts about her ankles, and swinging both her feet up onto it; then lying back flat, with her hands folded across her chest, and at a loss to know where to look.

"She's not absolutely helpless," Dr. Booth explained in his professional manner. "Has the use of her arms partially, as most invalids do. The idea is: you must let your body and chest carry part of the weight, after



the first lift. I'll show you." He leaned over Reba. "Put your right arm over my shoulder, back of my neck, please," he instructed.

Reba did exactly as she was bidden. Dr. Booth slipped his arms beneath her.

"A little firmer grasp with the right arm, please, Miss Jerome."

His face was very close to hers. She could see the brown flecks in his steely blue eyes.

"That's better. Now!" he said, and with apparently little effort, Reba felt her one hundred and eighteen pounds lifted in firm, skillful arms; supported against a strong, solid, softish wall, a little warm; carried across the room, and back; while the lecturer continued his explanations, as if she had been so much merchandise, laid her skillfully back upon the bed without a jar or jolt, and straightening himself afterward, made flawless again, with little masculine motions, slightly disarranged sleeve, cuff, and coat-collar.

"Oh, it looked so easy," exclaimed one of the elderly women.

"Let me see if I can do it," twittered another.

"And me, too," said a third, slipping off a tight jacket, and laying aside notebook and pencil.

How the old ladies tugged and pulled, exerted and strained, and the one who did succeed finally in getting Reba up off the bed into her arms (she was full-busted and short-armed), how she wheezed and panted!

"Oh, do show us again, Dr. Booth," she pleaded. "There's a knack to it."

And he did show them again, not once—but twice. It was the fatal third time that Reba, who had succeeded thus far in keeping herself under control,



blushed when Dr. Booth leaned over her, and again asked her to place her arm over his shoulder. There was no more cause to blush this third time than before; nor so much, for she was prepared now. But Reba's blushes were often unaccountable. It was no slight blush. Her face grew scarlet. The bright glow spread to her very ear-tips.

Dr. Booth observed it, of course. He would have been blind indeed if he hadn't. But naturally it was necessary to complete the demonstration once begun—lift her up, and put her down again gently.

Afterward he mercifully turned immediately away from her with a brief, "Thank you very much, Miss Jerome. That's all." And Reba got out of the room somehow.

During the following fortnight she suffered horribly from chagrin when she recalled that blush. But Dr. Booth's unchanged and impersonal attitude toward her, after the episode, was proof to her that her blush was of small significance to him, and the experience was just beginning to lose its grasp upon her when something else happened to make its details flash up bright and vital again.

One night, unaware that he would be inconveniencing any one, Dr. Booth remained in his lecture-room after he had dismissed his class at the usual hour of nine-thirty, in order to correct some papers (he had given his pupils a short quiz), and after he had finished with the papers, he glanced through a typewritten manuscript of his own—a report on a recent investigation—that should be mailed that night.

When he emerged into the large outer room, into which the smaller classrooms all opened, he observed



that it had a deserted appearance. There was only one light burning in a far corner. He glanced at his watch. Nearly eleven! Had he stayed so long? Oh, well! He put on his hat, and then lit a fresh cigarette. Suddenly he observed that beneath the light in the far corner Miss Jerome was seated at her desk as usual. She was knitting.

"You here still?" he exclaimed, instinctively removing his hat and cigarette at sight of her, and approaching her desk. "I'm sorry. Were you waiting till I cleared out?"

Reba kept on knitting.

"Oh, I didn't mind."

"I had no idea I was keeping any one," he told her.

"Oh, you weren't," she assured him, her eyes still downcast.

"Nor that it was so late, either. Haven't they a janitor around this place? What is it you have to do, anyhow?"

Reba still kept her eyes safely on her amber needles.

"Just turn out a few lights, and lock a few doors. That's all."

"Well, look here, you must let me help," he said, and tossed his cigarette into the basket by Reba's desk.

"Oh, no—please don't bother," replied Reba. "I don't mind. Really. But it's very kind of you," she added, glancing up, and hastily dropping her eyes again.

They were all alone in the big, hollow-sounding room—absolutely alone in this section of the building. The color began mounting to Reba's cheeks. Dr. Booth surveyed her a moment in silence. By George, how pretty the little secretary was, blushing slowly like that!

Chadwick Booth enjoyed pretty girls, when he had



nothing else to enjoy, and he certainly had nothing else to-night.

"Nonsense," he laughed. "Didn't *you* help *me* the other night?" He recalled now the vivid blush of that occasion. "I wouldn't have tried to lift one of those two-hundred pounders for a good deal," he smiled, looking straight at Reba and forcing the blush that was but a faint one, so far, to a deep rose. "You must let me reciprocate a little, after such a service. Come, let's lock up, or whatever it is you have to do. And then you must let me take you wherever you want to go. I've my car at the door."

Reba swept him another flickering glance. How like he was to the young god in the white flannels who had asked her to go sailing so many years ago, standing before her like this, offering to take her in his car somewhere—she wasn't quite sure where—in such chivalrous fashion, tossing away whole cigarettes out of politeness to her. She wished she knew if a young lady of Dr. Booth's own circle would accept his invitation, and if so, just how. But she didn't know, so she replied, shaking her head, and keeping her needles in action, and her eyes upon them, "Oh, no thank you."

"But you've got to get home some way, haven't you?"

"Oh, you mean *home*!" she exclaimed.

Yes, he meant home, of course. But—he surveyed Reba with awakening interest. Had he been mistaken? Was that shy little manner of hers assumed?

"We could take the long way round home," he said.

Reba didn't know why the sudden change of Dr. Booth's voice sent such a thrill of pleasure through her. But it did!



"I'm sorry. I'm home already. I live here," she told him.

"Live here!" he repeated, gazing at her critically. "In *this* place!" He was still in doubt. She was dressed rather expensively—wore to-night a silk sweater (Chadwick Booth knew silk sweaters when he saw them, and their prices too). Reba's was a blue and gold changeable affair. "Live here! You! Exotic young lady!" he said, shaking his head. Then, "Well," he resumed with a sigh, "if you insist upon it—and won't come joy-riding with me—" he left the sentence unfinished for several seconds, but she simply kept on knitting rather exasperatingly. "If you won't accept my invitation—" he gave her still a second opportunity, but she didn't take it, "then, good-night," he finished.

"Good-night," said Reba, glancing up once again from under her lashes, and, this time, daring to let her gaze linger a second or two.

"Pretty eyes she has. Brownish," thought Chadwick Booth three minutes later as he stepped into his car.

And as he sped away Reba, left behind in the deserted Red Cross rooms, two stories up in the Alliance building, was gravely brushing the pile of cigarette ashes Dr. Booth had left behind on a corner of his desk, into the palm of her hand and depositing them in the waste-basket.

Afterward, in her room, she cooped up her palm over her nose and drew in a deep breath of the faint fragrance.

"I wonder what 'exotic' means," she said.

## CHAPTER XXI

THE third time that Chadwick Booth was thrown across Reba's path followed so soon after the second occasion, that it seemed almost a continuation of it. It was only three days after Chadwick Booth had asked Reba to let him take her somewhere in his car, that Katherine Park, one warm June Saturday morning, announced in her playfully authoritative manner that she was going to carry Reba off home with her for over Sunday, so please to be ready at five sharp.

The untarnished pleasure that Reba had felt over the unexpected invitation made Dr. Booth and the tone of his voice and the change of his manner when he had said, "we can take the long way round home" fade into insignificance. As Reba made preparation that Saturday morning for the afternoon start at five sharp upon that short, but to her momentous, journey, to the high-court of the house where Katherine Park lived, she had no presentiment of the nature of the awakening that was awaiting her there.

The Park residence proved to be a large, vine-covered, frame house, set low, upon a rolling close-cropped lawn, spread out beneath high chestnut trees, trimmed as sleek as clipped horses. The front door was approached by a long gravel drive, that had been lately raked over—more pleasing than the concrete drive at 89 Chestnut Street, Reba concluded.

In fact, everything about the Park home (the only home, that she had ever spent a Sunday in, besides



her own) made the dull gray shell at the top of Chestnut Street appear a soulless thing. There was a feeling of luxury about the Park home, the minute one stepped foot in it. This was not confined to its furnishings (there was a great deal too much furniture, Katherine's sensitive architect brother, Gerard, complained), but the same superfluity, obvious in the over-supply of armchairs, drop-lights, cigar-stands, long row of magazines and periodicals, laid out upon the library table, and piled here and there on numerous stands and book-case tops around the edge of the room, was manifest also in the miscellaneous array of people, who appeared to be making their permanent or temporary headquarters under the expansive Park roof.

Reba couldn't straighten them all out, or explain the presence of half of them there. They were not all Parks, by any means. Upon her arrival she had been introduced to a confusing group of individuals, which she and Katherine had found on the broad veranda when they had driven up in the automobile. They were consuming bits of lemon from an otherwise empty pitcher which not long since must have been well-filled with some sort of refreshment, from the appearance of the dozen or thereabouts empty glasses carelessly distributed on chair-seats, piazza-rails, and window-sills.

Reba could not make out why certain of the people on that veranda, such as Tommy Blake, for instance, ("a neighbor of ours," it had been tossed to her during the hurried introduction) remained for the evening repast in the dining-room, while others, such as Katherine's own mother, were absent. It was easily enough explained, of course. Tommy's people were away and Mrs. Park was presiding at a meeting of some sort



in a near-by town-hall. She was presiding pretty continually that spring, Katherine told Reba. Liked it, as some other women liked to give dinner-parties, or to shine in the drawing-room.

The Park house was a Liberty-Hall sort of place. Everybody did as he or she pleased. There seemed to be no distinction made, either, between family and guest. Such freedom! Such informality! At first Reba felt frightened by it all, but after her first plunge she discovered to her relief that her silence, behind which she hid her shyness (and with some grace and distinction now) would be less noticeable in such an uproar. It was really necessary for somebody to sit quiet and listen. Saturday night at the Park home was always rather noisy, with a college boy at home, and several of his pals, and "Unexpecteds" (Katherine's expression) dropping in from no one knew where.

Katherine had conducted Reba, upon their arrival, to two of the guest-rooms on the third floor, before she found one unoccupied.

"Tell me if there's anything you want," she had said, as she had left Reba. "And put on the blue-gray dress. Dinner is somewhere around half-past-six or seven. I'll come up for you, and I'm going to have you sit beside the darlindest man alive."

The "darlindest man alive" proved to be Alexander Park, a vague name to Reba, but one often seen in the papers—a banker or lawyer, one of the two, Reba believed—and Katherine's father. After Katherine had placed one of her playful kisses on the end of his nose, just as they were sitting down to dinner about half-past seven, and then twisted the bit of gray hair on top of his head into a funny little peak, so that he looked



like a Campbell twin, and called him an "old dear," Reba's awe of him disappeared a little, and she felt as if she could almost love him herself, when he reached over and squeezed her idol's hand, and said, "There's none finer than my Katherine!"

That such a relation between father and daughter existed, that such a home life as the Parks' was an actuality, were revelations to Reba! And in New England too! All New England Yankees were not, then, restricted and parsimonious, for the Parks were New England Yankees to the bone. Katherine often boasted of it.

It was after the bountiful repast was finished (Reba thought she had never seen quite so big a roast), when the noisy group around the dinner-table had moved to the vine-shrouded veranda, that out of the darkness of the drive, along which, a scant four hours before, Reba had rolled into this amazing atmosphere, an automobile appeared, drew up before the two or three granite steps that led up to the front door of the Park house, and stopped.

"Hello!" lustily sung out one of the Parks.

"Who are you, stranger?" called another.

"Get out and come in," invited the perfectly-at-home Tommy Blake, though Reba wondered at his presumption.

Gerard Park lazily uncrossed his knees, got up, and strolled over toward the granite steps.

"Hello, Gerard," said some one from the dark interior of the closed automobile.

"Oh! You? Hello, Chad!" replied Gerard. "Glad to see you. Come on up."

"City is pretty dead," Reba heard a familiar voice



responding, as she observed with fluttering heart a familiar figure letting himself out of the car. "My people all away. Thought I might find somebody alive out here," he explained, approaching Gerard Park and shaking hands with him. "How are you?"

"It's Chad Booth," Gerard Park announced to the group on the dark veranda. "You know Doctor Booth, don't you, Katherine, and Constance?"

The two older Park sisters replied, "Oh, yes indeed. Good evening, Doctor Booth!"

And Gerard went on, "Do you know Miss Hills, my aunt, Chad? And my father? And—let's see—it's so dark here—Miss Quigley over there by the railing, and next to her kid-sister Peggy, and Miss Jerome, and Mrs. Remington, and Tommy Blake—you know Tommy?" (Oh, yes indeed, he knew Tommy) "and over where you see that swarm of cigarette glow-worms, a dozen or so, more or less, hungry men from Cambridge Jimmie picked up on his way out. Well, how are you, Chad? Sit down."

Reba moved her chair back a bit into a deeper shadow. She was glowing all over with excitement. Think of it! Meeting him socially like this! Chadwick Booth! She! Think of her, Rebecca Jerome, mixing up familiarly with people of this sort.

She watched Dr. Booth sit down in the chair somebody shoved up for him, accept a cigarette somebody else offered, and light it in his fine manner with as keen delight as ever she had watched and admired an actor on the stage. What a gentleman he was! How clearly he enunciated the few formal sentences he addressed to Miss Quigley beside whom he was seated. Later, how well he expressed himself to Mr. Park on the



inexhaustible topic of the European War. The realization that this man had asked her to go riding with him three days ago in the very car drawn up there in the Park drive filled Reba with tingling pride. Why, this man's cigarette ashes she had held in the palm of her hand! This man's firm shoulder muscles she had felt beneath her arm!

He had no idea that she was there—hadn't caught her name in Gerard Park's off-hand introduction, of course, and even if he had, would not have connected her with the official young lady who occupied the desk in the Red Cross rooms at the Alliance. It was fortunate. Reba didn't want to be discovered; didn't, of all things, want to appear at a disadvantage before Dr. Booth, and she would be sure to in this unfamiliar setting.

She began hoping after the first half-hour had passed that he would rise and go, and relieve her of the apprehension of discovery. At any moment, it suddenly occurred to her, the conversation might veer about, so that Katherine Park would recall Dr. Booth's connection with her position at the Alliance, and mention it.

It was not thus, however, that Chadwick recognized Reba. He must have been sitting there on the veranda a full hour when Tommy Blake suddenly shoved back his chair and disappeared into the house. A minute later a victrola just inside an open window began playing the opening phrases of a popular dance; and Tommy, returning, made significant motions with his arms and feet to Mrs. Remington seated on the piazza railing.

"All right, Tommy," Mrs. Remington nodded back,



and hopped down from her perch and disappeared with Tommy Blake inside the house.

"Oh, that's fine!" exclaimed Mr. Park, abruptly interrupting his own argument. "Have some dancing, you young people. Go into the music-room, roll up the rugs, and have some dancing."

Reba's heart contracted. Could it be worse? The glare of lights! And dancing! True enough, she did help Katherine Park in the simple instruction of the modern steps at the Alliance every noon, but that was different. She had, moreover, covertly taken private lessons with a Miss Boutwell at a fashionable Back Bay hotel, so as to make herself more adept as an instructor. But Miss Boutwell was not a man. Reba had never danced yet with a man. Oh, she couldn't try it for the first time, *here—now!*

Could she not escape somehow? Weren't there some back-steps somewhere? There were concealing shrubs enough about the house where she could hide herself till the music stopped, if she could once get off the veranda. But how? Where? The couples were rapidly pairing off. Katherine already had been borne away by one of the college men. Reba looked about her desperately.

Then suddenly she became aware of a tall figure before her, and a voice politely inquiring, "Won't you try this with me?"

Of course it was he! Of course it was Dr. Booth! Of course Fate would be as cruel as it possibly could!

"I'm afraid I'm not very good at it," Reba stammered.

"I'm sure you are," he assured her politely.

"I'm not, really."



"Oh, well, let's try it, anyhow—out here, if you prefer." He motioned to a dark end of the veranda.

"Well, I will *try*," Reba miserably acquiesced at last.

She did try, though after the first half-minute there was no more "try," no more endeavor about it than about a ribbon of smoke that drifts whither the slightest breeze desires.

Miss Boutwell had told her that she was as light as a feather, had complimented her dancing; but then, Miss Boutwell was a teacher, took her money. She had found pleasure in dancing with Miss Boutwell. But this!

There was a terrace with a smooth marble floor that was laid flush with the close-cropped lawn, running along the length of the music-room in which the others were dancing, and after the first revealing five minutes on the veranda, Chadwick Booth said quietly to his partner, "Let us go down there," and led the way down an easy step or two, off the veranda onto the dimly glowing surface of the balustraded terrace. Upon the terrace, through the open windows the music filtered softly; above it the faint stars gleamed; and about it crowded fragrant shrubs, which now and again, through succeeding one-step, waltz, and fox-trot, brushed Reba caressingly as she passed by them.

Thus Dr. Booth and Reba danced for some twenty minutes or half an hour, alone out there in the dark—Reba too awed and frightened to speak, and Chadwick Booth too appreciative of the mysterious silence of his fairy-footed partner to jar the situation with anything so crude as speech. Even through the short intervals



between the records they neither of them attempted conversation, simply stood and waited—Chadwick Booth with folded arms trying to make out the features of the slight, hand-clasped girl before him, who was so cleverly creating an interesting situation by her baffling silence, wondering with piqued curiosity who and what she was.

Finally, in the midst of a waltz, he murmured softly, "By George, but you can dance!"

And Reba replied, "I never danced with a man before in my life!"

Of course he didn't take her words literally. "And *I* never danced with a *woman* before!" he whispered, and pressed her a little closer.

It was Katherine Park's bright voice that interrupted that magic waltz under the stars.

"Come on in, you two," she called from the window. "We all have had enough in here, and are moving on to the dining-room. Gerard's foraging for something cold." Then immediately she left the window and appeared a second later on the veranda above Reba and her partner. She pushed a button, and flooded the place with sudden light. "Can you see?" she asked them. "There are some steps buried under that honeysuckle somewhere, just here, I think," she directed, and as they approached she added, "It never occurred to me till just a minute ago that you two know each other at the Alliance." Then turning and walking toward the door she called back over her shoulder, "Come in and get something cold to drink."

The light that she had turned on fell full upon Chadwick Booth and Reba as they mounted the steps, and



Reba saw the surprised expression on Dr. Booth's face as he looked down and slowly recognized her.

"You?" he exclaimed softly. Then, "Know each other!" He gave a little pleased laugh, "Oh, no, we don't! Not half, yet!"



## CHAPTER XXII

WHEN Dr. Booth had said good-night to his dancing-partner, he had had to hunt for her. Reba, as always fearful of ceremonies and formal hand-shakings, had stepped into a shadow when Dr. Booth started to take his departure.

"Oh, there you are!" he had exclaimed, when finally he found her. "I've been looking for you." Then in a low voice, meant for her ears alone, he added, "We must have another dance soon together, mustn't we? I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll get up a little party with Miss Park and Gerard and somebody else, if you'll come. Will you?"

"Oh, I'd like to."

"And," he went on, enthusiastically, "we'll go somewhere to dinner, and then somewhere to dance afterward, where there is some *real* music. Soon, too! How's next Saturday, a week from to-night, for you?" he asked.

"It is all right for *me*."

"I'll let you know. Good-night," he said and held out his hand. Reba put hers into it. "Till Saturday then," he smiled, gave her hand a little significant squeeze, dropped it suddenly, turned and hurried away.

Reba didn't sleep very much that night. Her whole world had suddenly taken on a different color. She had seen in a flash what the pleasures of youth were that she had been missing all her life. That half-hour on the marble terrace, underneath the stars, pos-



sessed her body and mind. She couldn't get away from it. She didn't want to get away from it. She wanted to rehearse every detail that had led up to Dr. Booth's thrilling tribute to her "And *I* never danced with a woman before." And she did rehearse them, over and over again.

The next morning it was all excitement in the Park household, because of a telegram that Katherine Park had been called to receive over the telephone, while she and her father, and Reba, and two or three other early-risers were seated at the breakfast-table about nine o'clock.

Reba thought she had never seen Katherine's face quite so shining as when she returned from the telephone.

"It's come, people," she announced quietly from the door.

Reba saw Mr. Park's face flush suddenly as he abruptly glanced up over the rim of his reading-glasses, which he had put on, before attacking the pretty pile of unhulled strawberries on the plate before him.

"What's come?" he demanded impatiently, as if he very well knew.

"Marching orders, Daddy," replied Katherine, and went over to him immediately, perched herself on the arm of his chair, and began rumpling up his hair. "Oh, do be a little glad," she went on coaxingly, for Mr. Park sat impassive beneath her playful caresses, devoting his attention undividedly to the immediate business before him of strawberries and powdered sugar. "Do be a little happy with me," she rubbed her cheek against his baldish head. "I'm not going into the trenches, silly man."



Reba knew very well the nature of the news that made Katherine's eyes shine like that, and her voice shake a little. She knew that for the last twelve months Katherine's ambition had been to go to France with a hospital unit.

She was not a trained nurse, but surely, as again and again she had tried to persuade the various doctors, organizers, and high officials of the units preparing for service behind the trenches, surely she could make herself of use in a hospital. She was not afraid of work—nor of blood either—"strong as an ox," she would boast; could run an ambulance if they would let her; was willing to do anything—make beds, scrub, wash dishes, help in the kitchen, help *anywhere*, if only they would accept her. But, no, in spite of pressing every possibly influential friend she possessed into exerting his power in her behalf, time and again there proved to be no necessity for eager, intelligent hands such as hers, if she lacked a trained nurse's diploma. And then suddenly the summons! From New York! A unit organized by a surgeon of wide reputation was sailing on the following Wednesday, she explained. She was to report on Tuesday.

The telegram was brief, anything but satisfying to Mr. Park. He couldn't even finish his strawberries, much less attempt the parsley-trimmed fish-balls. Only a cup of coffee, and a slice of toast. That was all. But he patted Katherine's hand just the same. Reba saw that.

"It's your life, and you are old enough to use your own judgment. I'm glad you've got your wish, though it isn't just mine," he said. "Now run along, run



along," he finished and Katherine hopped down and went back to her chair next to Reba's.

Reba was fully aware of what an event this was in Katherine's life. Going to France! Going to the great war! It was splendid—magnificent! But what about Chadwick Booth's dinner party next Saturday night? Katherine would be a third way across the Atlantic. O dear, there wouldn't be any dinner-party now!

But there was. Chadwick Booth attended to that. A European conflict mustn't be allowed to interfere with another dance such as that the other night, must it? No! He should say not, he laughed at Reba.

If Reba had hesitated at first, after an hour's reflection she was persuaded that it was a perfectly conventional thing to do. Dr. Booth had fully intended to ask Katherine Park (he had said so) and any party including Katherine was of course beyond reproach. Moreover, Dr. Booth was a friend of the Parks', and that was sufficient voucher to Reba that he was all things good and desirable. It would be presuming and prudish of one of her limited experience and bringing-up even to question the propriety of anything a man like Dr. Booth suggested, and she didn't want to appear prudish.

Of course there was that vague, dimming morning at the minister's to consider. But going to dinner with Dr. Booth was nothing that need trouble her conscience as far as Nathan was concerned, need it? Mrs. Remington, who was one of the guests at the Parks' a week ago, had quite readily accepted an invitation from that Tommy Blake to go to a concert with him



(Reba had heard her) and Mrs. Remington's husband was in Philadelphia on a business trip. Mrs. Remington, Katherine had told Reba, when she inquired, was a Park before her marriage, a second cousin, or something of the sort, and always came over to the Park homestead when her husband was away on trips. Surely what Katherine's cousin did as a matter of course, Reba could rest assured was all right, for her to do.

Besides, she *wanted* to go—she wanted to go with all her heart—as much as Katherine wanted to go to France, she guessed. New Englanders were always denying themselves pleasure. This was her great opportunity for crawling under the edge of the curtain onto a corner of that stage which she had so yearningly gazed upon ever since she was a young girl at the summer-hotels. She went. And not only once.

It was a hot June, and a hotter July that year in Boston. Reba had volunteered early in the spring to remain at her post throughout the summer, taking her vacation, if she needed it at all, in September. Her duties were less arduous than in the winter, but the sewing-rooms were to be kept open for part of each day and there were to be one or two courses in First Aid continued through the summer for groups who had applied for the instruction. Dr. Booth had offered to teach these groups, as he explained he had to remain in town anyway, and might as well. It happened that it was after he had taken Reba to the cool place he knew about for dinner, and afterward to dance to some *real* music, that he so generously offered his services.

Reba was feverishly happy during the first month or



six weeks of Dr. Booth's flattering and irresistible attentions. Nothing like it had ever happened to her before. Homage, in the dazzling form that Dr. Booth offered it, had never been paid to Reba in her life. To find herself seated in a restaurant at a little electric-candle-lighted table, her hands folded upon a snowy cloth, awaiting the arrival of little-neck clams embedded on cracked ice, or huge salmon-colored cantaloupe, or chilled heart-of-watermelon, with such dishes as broiled-live-lobster, or mushrooms under glass to follow, was so new to Reba that even without the lean hands folded two inches away from hers upon the cloth, and the gaze of the blue, brown-flecked eyes so disconcertingly near—even without these, it would have been difficult for her to resist the lure of the elegance of the entertainment offered her.

Chadwick Booth's personality itself was, of course, attractive to Reba, but it was not only the charm he possessed for women generally that held her. There was charm to her in the things he wore. His linen for instance, glimpses of striped lavenders, and cool greens, gave pleasure to Reba. There was something about his very shoes, too, a smartness, trigness, that was indicative to her of the fastidious world he had stepped out of—*down* out of—to spend some of his precious hours of recreation with her. She was continually stealing joy, too, from such physical details as high cheek-bones; smoothly shaven jaws; white shining teeth, beneath the small, black bristling moustache; clean high expanse of forehead. To Reba, Chadwick Booth's inclination to baldness betokened a subtle refinement that had been quite absent in her shock-headed Italian, and the sailor.



Oh, the sailor! The sailor! The sailor was the only dram of bitter in Reba's overflowing cup of intoxicating sweet. But after a while she became used to the bitter, just as when a child she became used to the bitter of choke-cherries after eating the first dozen, observing finally only the rare flavor.

The "Ellen T. Robinson" might have been lost in a storm by this time, for all Reba knew. When she had spent that Sunday with Katherine it had been weeks, months, since one of the spasmodic letters had arrived to remind her of "Number Four's" existence. Even the link that the residence in the Back Bay had been between her and the strange man of the sea had disappeared, for the house had been sold two years ago.

Mr. Barton had never returned to it, or permanently anyhow. A call had been given him by a church in San Francisco, whither the "Ellen T. Robinson" had borne him, and where he had remained afterward for a month or so. Reba had read of his acceptance of this call in the newspapers, and that Mrs. Barton was going to join her son in his new field of activity. There remained, therefore, little to remind Reba of her marriage—little to make her fear discovery; and though often she was sunk in deepest reflection because of it, over and over again she told herself that there was nothing in her new friendship that need disturb her. She and Dr. Booth were just friends, companions, after all. Even Dr. Booth emphasized that.

"We're both of us miserable, city-bound wretches this summer. Why not play together these hot nights, instead of each of us sitting miserably under an electric-light-bulb somewhere, and trying to kill time till a



respectable retiring hour. We both of us are fellow-laborers. Let's be fellow-playmates too."

"I'm bored to death," he would write to her, in the little penciled notes she would find concealed inside the First Aid reference-book he borrowed from her desk, and returned afterward with such apparent off-handedness (he was careful to appear nothing but correctly official at the Alliance). "I'm bored. Come, please, and cheer up my lonely dinner-hour to-night, will you, Pal?" Or in a similar note, a day or two later, "You look wan and tired, Becky." (He had adopted Becky after their first dinner-party together.) "As a physician I prescribe one cool forty-mile drive next Saturday P.M., followed by a refreshing repast in sound of salt-sea waves, a dance or two, for exercise afterward, and a not too-late return (I promise you, little Miss Prim) by gorgeous moonlight. What do you say?"

There was never any taint of love in Dr. Booth's rollicking notes, nor in his manner either, Reba concluded. There was not, anyhow, any stealthy imprisoning of her hand—nothing of that sort. Whatever peculiar pleasure she herself felt, in dancing with him, she was sure was not shared in the same way by him—a man of his sophistication, who according to his own statement had danced himself stale two winters ago. They were friends, that was all. She was glad that she had gotten away from the narrow Ridgefield idea that a man and a girl couldn't be friends without being lovers. Why, Dr. Booth sometimes in the automobile would even grasp her hand, with a free one of his, and give it a hard, delighted squeeze, as he laughed jovially at some remark or naïve question of hers. It



was no caress to *him*, although it did send the blood surging through her. He would have done the same to a boy or a child.

Chadwick Booth fully intended to keep this amazing little discovery of his just what his words and manner portended—a pal, a harmless amusement for hot, summer evenings when everybody was away from town; when the echoing rooms of the uninhabited Back Bay house, in the front of which his office was located, offered no consolation; and the summer places of his friends, where he might have been received for over a Sunday only the tamest sort of entertainment.

In her way, Reba was quite as much of a novelty to Chadwick Booth as he to her. For after their first dinner-party alone, he discovered that she was as genuinely fresh a bit of femininity as he had ever run across. Most of the women of his acquaintance were so terribly used-to-everything, and worldly-wise. To those of his own social circle the pleasures of dining-out, and of brilliant ballrooms, were old and drained pleasures. To those *outside* his social circle, with whom he sometimes sought to amuse himself, the joys of restaurants and dance-halls appeared equally tasteless. Not until Chadwick Booth began selecting delectable dishes for Becky, planning little surprises in the way of an unexpected rose beside her plate, or package of sweets, did he know what joy (harmless joy, too, he told himself) there could be in giving a good time to a girl—a woman, that is, for Reba did not give the impression of girlhood, shy and eager as she was. There was a ripeness about her that did not require her confession to her twenty-eight years to assure Chadwick Booth that he was playing the part of no cradle-snatcher.



There was, too, a tantalizing unexpectedness about her. She had the most human and understandable desire for pleasures and little harmless worldly delights, which he knew so well how to provide, forever at war with an odd strain, amounting almost to asceticism, that to his satisfaction usually got the worst of it when he was near at hand. But not always. The strength of Becky's resistance, at times, was amazing to Chadwick Booth. He could almost hear the beat of the wings of her impulses against the prison walls of her New England reserve, but he could not always break the walls. Therefore was added the lure of conquest.

She dressed, too, in surprisingly good taste; never appeared conspicuous, nor, on the other hand, dowdy. She might have been, to any of his acquaintances who chanced to see them together, a sister or cousin.



## CHAPTER XXIII

REBA didn't know just when the fraternal attitude of Dr. Booth toward her changed to something more significant. It was very gradual, and for a while, just as with Nathan, she wondered if she was manufacturing it, if he *was* conscious of any change himself. He was conscious of it, and fought it for a while. But not very persistently. It culminated one hot Saturday night at the end of a long afternoon together, when high, protecting rocks, and the long-continued, almost hypnotizing effect of a steadily-pounding surf seemed to draw them together—hide them away, and make them forget all conventionalities, all obligations outside their secluded crevice.

As frequently of late, Reba had been reading to Chadwick Booth in the early afternoon, out of a large, scientific-looking volume (Chadwick Booth was writing an article for a medical journal) and he had laughed, reached out, and squeezed her hand delightedly, two or three times, over her amusing pronunciations of unfamiliar technical words and phrases. He had, too, gently jibed her for blushing because he touched her hand.

"What if I should kiss you?" tauntingly he had flung at her once; and she, in that almost tragic voice she assumed sometimes, had exclaimed, "I wish you wouldn't talk to me like that."

"Proper little Miss New England!" he had thrust at her playfully.



"I'm not so proper as you think."

How she hated to be called proper! He knew it, and smiled teasingly up at her. He was lying flat upon his back with his hands folded beneath his head, with one knee drawn up, and perched upon it his other foot, shod in spotless white. Reba was sitting very straight beside him, with the large book resting on her lap.

"Never mind my jokes," he placated patronizingly, and patted her with one of his lean hands. "Go on, I'm listening."

They were on the safest sort of ground then. They had frolicked like this time and time again together. It wasn't then that the flimsy curtain between them was ripped down.

At about six-thirty Dr. Booth had opened before Reba's eyes a marvelous lunch-basket, equipped with plates, and cups and saucers, and shining silver; and had laid out before her, in the roseate glow of the sunset, the astonishing picnic-lunch (packed six hours earlier at his club) consisting of a roast duck, dainty rolls, and a fruit salad; and later, from out of magical thermos bottles and jars, had produced ice-cream and hot coffee, and some old French wine he had rummaged in the wine-closet for, at home, before he started.

They partook of the feast jovially, like carefree children, and afterward Reba picked up the dishes and packed them all carefully away in the basket again, still softly exclaiming over the wonder of the Aladdin-like repast, and deploring the fact that she didn't have some good, hot water to make bright and shining again the pretty, flower-sprigged china. Chadwick Booth lolled back on the rocks and watched her through the curling smoke of his cigarette, as she moved in the



gloaming above him, and after she had completed her housewifely duties, he sat up and motioned to her to come and sit down beside him.

"Don't you think we'd better be starting back now?" she asked.

"Back?" he smiled lazily up at her. "Back where? Didn't you know we were shipwrecked this morning, and that this is a deserted island? Oh, come, Becky," he broke off, "sit down a little while. There's going to be a moon later."

"Well," she agreed, and accepted the place he made ready for her beside him on his rough overcoat.

"Comfortable?" he asked gently, after a minute or two of silence.

"Oh, yes," she quavered. She had caught that indescribable change in his voice that stole so frequently into it of late, and—"I ought to go," she chided herself, "I ought to." But she didn't stir; just sat very still and silent, listening to the monotonous pound-pound-pound of the waves nearby, while the steadily gathering night, gradually, minute by minute, covered their hidden retreat by a soft velvety blackness—so thick, so dense, that it blotted out even the white froth of the surf breaking not fifteen feet away.

There was not even the usual glow of Chadwick Booth's cigarette, for he had tossed it away when Reba had come to sit beside him, and, loath to prick the dark by even so small a spark, he had not lit a second one. There was something elemental about the blackness, the booming of the invisible waves, and the feeling of remoteness, that would have taken hold of Reba even if she had been alone there.

After a tense half-hour, the moon—a huge, orange-



colored, slow-moving disk, began creeping up slowly over the edge of nearby moorlands, and Reba suddenly drew in her breath very deep, and ever so softly exclaimed, "Oh, see!"

It was then that Chadwick Booth abruptly, almost roughly, threw his arm behind her and kissed her—as he had been hungry for days and days to kiss her, as Reba had never before been kissed in her life!

Afterward they groped their way back, somehow, to the waiting automobile, got into it, and drove away; and all the fifty-mile run back to Boston there passed between them only the most casual of remarks—brief, trivial little sentences, such as, "That was a close shave," from Dr. Booth when another car all but side-wiped his mud-guards. Or, from Reba, "Remember, there's a policeman-trap in this town." And his brief response, "I'll be careful."

Once back in her room at the Alliance, Reba undressed methodically enough and went to bed—but not to sleep.

He loved her! Chadwick Booth! And like that! And she loved him, too! She confessed it now without shame. She had loved him ever since that night on the marble terrace. He would ask her to marry him to-morrow, or the day after—next time they met. Think of it! She beloved, and asked in marriage by Chadwick Booth! She—Reba Jerome! Oh, the gulf between them yawned frightfully wide. It scared her a little. His women friends would make her appear awkward and raw, she feared. And how would his mother, and his sisters receive her? Had he a mother and sisters? Her knowledge of his home-life was very



meager, very slight. Oh, well—she mustn't worry—not yet. Everything would be all right if he loved her.

Reba had not forgotten Nathan. But the revelation that she loved, and was loved, in such a manner as this, made her relations to Nathaniel Cawthorne appear insignificant. She blushed in the dark to recall *their* shy and awkward kiss in the station. It hadn't been a real marriage, theirs. Only a couple of "I do's," and "I will's," and a sentence or two repeated after a minister—a stranger to them both. In the brilliant light of her new love, she saw her marriage to Nathaniel Cawthorne revealed as a mere bugaboo without substantial form—something you could stick your hand through, it was so unreal. She would write to the stranger-sailor and ask for her release. She could now. Heaven, unasked, unsought, had sent her an excuse. She had remained as honestly true as she knew how, to her vows to him. She hadn't as much as even conjectured a way of escape; and suddenly, unexpectedly, this new love had descended upon her like a deluge from the clouds. There would be legal things about her marriage certificate that would have to be performed probably. She winced a little in the dark at the thought of that, for divorce had always meant disgrace to Reba. She had always looked upon it askance, like every one else in Ridgefield.

"But that was narrow and provincial," she told herself now. "I'm glad I'm out from under the yoke of Ridgefield notions!"

Just what legal steps to be taken in regard to her marriage would be necessary, Reba wasn't sure, but Chadwick Booth would know. Of course she meant



to tell him about her marriage, and the very next time they met. What a relief it would be to share at last with somebody else this ghost-like thing that had menaced her peace of mind so long! She would tell Dr. Booth how she was really more married to him already. He, so experienced, and worldly-wise, would know how to advise and guide her. In his world, Reba felt sure, there must be ways of escaping a rigid adherence to a hasty and ill-timed promise, at the price of a heaven-ordained love such as theirs and without publicity, perhaps. Thus Reba, the once morally-literal, single-motivated Reba, like many another daughter of Eve, saw her great desire as a lofty thing beside which everything else dwindled to small proportions, and for the realization of which she could so easily ride over and trample down everything in the way of an obstacle.

She didn't, however, tell Chadwick Booth about her marriage the next time they met. There didn't seem to be just the right opportunity for it. For Dr. Booth did not ask Reba to marry him the next time he saw her after the picnic supper, as Nathan had done after that significant night in the moving-picture theater. Though it occurred to Reba to tell Dr. Booth about her marriage even before he had made his formal proposal, she feared that it might seem to him bold and forward of her, to confess to him so intimate a thing, before he considered their courtship ripe enough for a betrothal.

He would, of course, declare himself soon, for he had been just as eager to be with her, and alone with her too—more than ever before, Reba thought—on the all-day boat-trip he took her on, following close upon



the picnic. Probably, she concluded, it had been rather a provincial proceeding of Nathan's to offer himself to her so quickly. Probably men of Dr. Booth's knowledge of the world were less precipitous with their proposals of marriage. When, however, two or three afternoons and evenings alone together had been passed, and still he had not spoken of marriage, Reba began searching for other causes for his silence. Was it, possibly, she wondered, because he was uncertain of *her* feelings for *him*?

She was sure that this was the explanation when, one afternoon, three or four weeks after the revelation on the rocks, he smiled down at her with a kind of hurt-boy, peevish sort of expression, and asked half seriously, half playfully, "Why are you so passive, Becky, still? What are you made of? Why don't you ever let yourself go? You let only your eyes tell me that you care a little?"

It was true, but it was only because she didn't know quite how to express herself. She reached out one of her hands, and placed it shyly, gently on his arm. He stared down at it, as if it had been a curious species of butterfly that had lit there.

"What a cool little first caress!" he exclaimed tauntingly. She flushed at that, but did not draw her hand away.

"You're so like the sun that you blind me—just at first," she told him, in way of explanation.

He took her hand at that and held it a moment in his. Then put it back in her lap again.

"I think," he said, "the sun must be careful not to burn such a shadow-grown little flower as you, Becky,"



and he didn't as much as look tenderly at her again the whole afternoon.

Oh, she must be bolder, braver, prove to him somehow how deeply she cared. She hadn't even replied to his remark about the sun.

"Oh, why," fiercely she asked herself later, when it was too late, "why didn't I tell him that I *like* his sunshine—hate and despise the cold shadowy place I've been growing in so long. Oh, why did I sit there silent and dumb, as if I agreed?"

During the long following week, when not a single one of Dr. Booth's notes fell out of the reference-book he returned to her at the close of each of his lectures, she blamed herself over and over again for her misleading reserve. When finally he did ask her "to play with him" again, relief surged consolingly through her, and the vehemence of his joy at being with her again made her so happy that she gave him back his caresses with a generosity that amazed even herself.

Still he didn't ask her to bear his name (how often she had written it of late, Rebecca Booth—she liked the alliteration of it—on scraps of paper destroyed immediately afterward), but never mind, she comforted herself. He would ask her *soon*. She had read somewhere the time of courtship was the happiest time of all. *He* was aware of that, of course, and possibly was prolonging the period. He could not know that there were certain events in her past life that made such a long courtship as theirs difficult for her; that there was a confession she longed to make to him; a confession, too, she longed to make to somebody else as soon as he gave her the right. Reba had not written to Nathan



since June. She couldn't bring herself to write to him in her usual casual manner. Silence was more honest, and she wanted at least to be honest.

Reba didn't like the duplicity of her position. Oh, *when* would Chadwick Booth speak? Again she contemplated telling him about the sailor. But no—no. How could she now? If ever, it should have been that first time among the rocks, by the waves. Now it would be indelicate, look as if she expected him to propose marriage to her. Of course she did expect it, and he must know she did, but no—no. Women must wait.



## CHAPTER XXIV

ONE warm early-September Saturday morning Reba made a trip to her dressmaker's to insure the safe delivery of a costume, consisting of a dress and hat (the dressmaker carried millinery, and other bits of finery, too) and a long canary-colored motor-coat, ordered especially for Chadwick Booth, whom, as usual on Saturdays now, she was to meet in his automobile on a side street three or four blocks away from the hospital where he was detained until four or five o'clock in the afternoon.

If Chadwick Booth liked pleasing Becky with menu-surprises, and pretty places of entertainment, Becky liked pleasing Chadwick Booth with pretty clothes. It might be only a word or two that he would let drop about a new gown, or hat, that she had put on with such care for his delectation, but if it was only an approving nod that he gave her when she appeared before him in some triumph from the seldom-erring dressmaker, it was sufficient to make her glow with happiness.

Last Saturday he had said to her, as she had sat against the yellowish background of a tiny tea-room, "I'd like to see you in corn-color sometime, Becky." And to-day Becky had gone to bring back to her room the embroidered corn-colored linen dress, which she had promptly ordered the preceding Monday; and broad-brimmed, corn-colored hat and motor-coat to match.



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It was when she was in her room trying on the dress, to make sure that every hook and fastener was in place, and every fold and fall of lace was perfect, that somebody knocked on her door. It was Louise Bartholomew.

"Oh, how pretty!" Louise exclaimed from the threshold. "But I must say, Rebecca, you're getting scandalously extravagant. I never knew a woman to get so many summer clothes at the tail-end of the season. Are you busy?" she broke off. "May I come in?"

"Do come in. You know I'm never busy Saturday mornings. Do you really like the dress, Louise?" Reba asked, and then a little anxiously, "Don't you think the shade a little too deep?"

"Not a bit," briefly Louise replied, and crossed the room and sat down. "Come, Rebecca. Come and sit down a minute, please. I've come up to talk a little while."

Reba looked sharply at Louise Bartholomew, left the mirror, and sat down abruptly on the foot of the bed.

"News from Katherine Park?" she inquired in a frightened voice.

"Heavens, no!" Louise assured her. "Goodness! How you do worship Katherine. No—she's all right, for all I know." Then suddenly she blurted out, "Oh, I hate this job! I hate what I've got to say to you, Rebecca."

"Why, what do you mean? What *have* you got to say?"

"If only Katherine Park were here!" sighed Louise. "But then," she tucked in, "if she were, it probably wouldn't have to be said at all. You see, Miss Ells-



worth" (Miss Ellsworth was the General Secretary of the Women's Alliance) "Miss Ellsworth thought I knew you next best, and so, and so—oh, Rebecca, are you going off again with Dr. Booth to-night?" she broke off.

Reba flushed. "Why, yes," she said, "I was. He asked me to go to dinner with him." Then after a miserable silence, "Is it about him Miss Ellsworth asked you to speak to me?"

Louise Bartholomew did not reply directly to that. "We workers here have to be so careful about whom we go with, and how we conduct ourselves," she explained. "We're sort of examples, you see. And you and Dr. Booth are getting just a little bit talked about."

Reba couldn't reply, she was so covered with shame. That such a reprimand as this was necessary! That she was guilty of misconduct! Oh, how could she look Louise Bartholomew in the face? If she only could have told her that she and Dr. Booth were engaged to be married! If only she could wipe out all offense by that quiet announcement! But she couldn't. Not yet. The crimson of her face turned to purple.

"I'm terribly sorry, Rebecca," Louise took up again. "But people keep seeing you—the girls, the boarders, you know, at different places. But, of course you can stop it," she comforted. She reached out, and put her hand on Reba's knee. "Don't take it too seriously. I told Miss Ellsworth we had only to drop you the hint, and I was sure you wouldn't be seen alone with him anywhere another single time."

"But," murmured Reba, "I—Katherine Park used to—and *you* sometimes, too—go out to dinner with young men alone, and——"



"Yes, of course, Rebecca; but, my dear, isn't it rather different for you to go with Dr. Booth?"

Reba wondered exactly why it was different.

"He's a friend of Katherine's," she said.

"Friend! No friend at all! A mere acquaintance."

"But he was at the Parks' that night."

"Oh, everybody's at the Parks'. Even that disgraceful connection of theirs, Marjorie Remington, just about lives there. That's nothing."

"He teaches *here*," groped Reba.

"Why, of course—of course. Being married doesn't interfere with his teaching here, in the least; nor in his going to the Parks', but it does interfere with his taking you out to dinner. Don't you see, silly? You can't go out dining alone with a married man. It just isn't done."

Reba looked down at her hands folded on her crossed knees. *Married!* The color left her face as completely as it had flooded it a moment ago. But she made no exclamation of surprise. The self-control she had practiced in the gray house on Chestnut Street stood her in good stead now. She gave way to no expression of pain, as the realization of Louise Bartholomew's information struck home.

"You do forgive me, don't you, Rebecca, for talking like this to you?" asked Louise.

"Of course, of course," Reba replied quietly.

"But I *had* to. Somebody had to, anyhow. I knew you didn't think much about it, one way or the other, but I must say I think Dr. Booth ought to be choked!"

"Oh, no," murmured Reba, more for the sake of something to say than to defend Chadwick Booth. "It wasn't his fault."



"Of course it was!" fiercely defended Louise Bartholomew. "Nobody else's fault! I don't consider it a bit of an excuse for a man, just because he is unhappily married, to play around with other women—especially unmarried women."

"Of course not," agreed Reba dully.

After Louise Bartholomew had finally left her room, Reba sat motionless on the foot of her bed, gazing at her folded hands, trying to comprehend just what had happened. Married! Is that what Louise had said? Married! Chadwick Booth! Why, if that were so, then she mustn't see him again, must she? She mustn't see him even this afternoon. She must *never* see him again. And she loved him! Tighter still she clasped her hands, clenched her crossed knees, and sat very still, staring into space. Later she became aware that one of her feet, so long held in one position, had become numb. Oh, *how* she wished that the same numbness might creep over her entire body, brain, and consciousness. Married! She reiterated the merciless word. Married! Married!

When Louise Bartholomew had let drop her information about Dr. Booth, she little guessed that she had struck a sword into Reba's heart. It had not occurred to her as possible that Rebecca Jerome could fill the position she did at the Alliance, and not know that Chadwick Booth was married, considering *whom* he had married—Virginia Cross, whose father was a wealthy New York banker, of an old long-established family. Why, everybody knew that Chadwick Booth was married, even Mamie and Lollie Terrence (Louise had heard them speak of it). Everybody knew that his marriage, while extremely advantageous to his position,



both socially and professionally, was not supposed to be a love-affair. If she had thought that Reba was ignorant of such well-known facts and suppositions about the much discussed Chadwick Booth, she would have been more gentle.

It was after Reba's brain had recovered a little from its first shock, that she began slowly, dully, rehearsing the details of the conversation that had just taken place in her room. Abruptly she stumbled onto Louise Bartholomew's last remark. What was it she had said? Unhappily married?

"Why," Reba exclaimed outloud, unlocking her long-clasped hands, "I'm unhappily married too!"

She stood up, walked over to the window, and looked out across the roofs. His marriage might not be any more restrictive than hers. Her heart gave a jerk of sudden hope. Moreover, might it not possibly account for his disturbing silence? It wouldn't be strange if there were things in his past life that must be arranged, wiped out, annulled, as well as in *hers*, before he was able to ask her to marry him, or she to do so.

"I must see him. I must talk with him," she said. She looked at her watch. There was time enough. It was only a little after two. "Of course I must see him," she told herself again, and the very thought that the immediate afternoon's meeting was not to be foregone acted like a stimulant upon her.

She became aware of hunger (she had not had anything to eat since breakfast), and slipping into her street suit, she went out to a nearby restaurant.

She was to meet Chadwick Booth at five o'clock; and by the time she had returned, finished with her careful toilette, and stood ready in her room, about



half-past four, in her corn-colored linen dress, concealed beneath the soft yellow motor-coat, the seed of hope contained in Louise's last words had grown into a conviction.

She was almost glad of the difficult task before her. She had not been really happy since that evening by the ocean, but after to-night there would be no more uncertainty, no more duplicity or secrets on either side. For Reba had slipped the broad gold wedding ring which Nathan had given her into her shopping-bag. It was her plan to show it to Chadwick Booth, after she had gently unearthed the facts of his unhappy alliance, thereby softening his discomfort (for she well knew he would deplore the pain the knowledge of his marriage would be expected to cause her). She would tell him that the mistake he had once made, she had made also, that they shared the same misfortune. It might draw them closer in sympathy; and if, as with a deep sigh it occurred to Reba possible, the realization of their love had to be sacrificed on some high altar of duty—postponed—it would be sweet comfort to her, a shining beacon, to know that they were suffering together, just as they had been happy together.

In this exalted mood Reba set forth upon her mission.



## CHAPTER XXV

THEY were dining that night at a picturesquely situated resort some thirty miles out of Boston. They had been there on several occasions before, for it combined an excellence of food and service, music and surroundings that was difficult to find within reasonable motoring distance of town. Its patronage was somewhat heterogeneous in character, as with all such resorts, but it was respectable. In fact, Dr. Booth had never taken Reba to any restaurant, dance-hall, or place of amusement where he was not perfectly willing to be seen with a woman other than his wife or sister, should any of his friends chance to run across him there, as they did sometimes. Moreover Reba wouldn't have fitted into too uproarious a place.

Chadwick Booth often smiled over her little prejudices. She strove hard to earn from him the title of all-round-good-sport, but there were certain things he could not persuade her to do. For instance, she would not go out to dinner with him on Sundays; and it appeared that a cocktail, or any form of alcohol, however mild, she recoiled from instinctively. Once in a long while she would acquiesce to a tiny little sip from his glass, and on one or two occasions, in the beginning of their relations (as, for instance, on the picnic on the rocks) she had accepted a glass of her own. But as she knew him better and dared, she refused absolutely to partake of this part of his entertainment.

"But why—why, Becky?" he'd demand impatiently.



"Oh, I just don't like it," she'd reply. "It's so bitter!"

"Nonsense," he'd laugh back at that, seeing through her ruse, and he'd follow up her flimsy excuse with some such taunt as, "Oh, Becky, don't the narrow little shoes squeeze?"

Such jibes would make Reba flush and squirm, but there were certain symbols of wickedness, certain standards of right and wrong, that no amount of holding up to scorn could persuade her to disregard.

To-night, it was after Chadwick Booth had drunk his usually solitary cocktail, and the waiter had departed with the carefully selected order, that Reba decided to open the subject so near her heart. She had waited until now, with careful purpose. All the pretty tributes had been paid her costume, all the day's happenings at the hospital detailed to her, all the latest questions of a certain amusing woman in the Wednesday-night First Aid class repeated and smiled over as usual; and Chadwick Booth had stretched out his long arm, and let his hand drop dead in Becky's lap once, guiding the car nonchalantly with his other hand, and had exclaimed in that small-boy way that appealed so to Reba, "Oh, I'm tired—tired, Becky, to-night. I want to be amused." He had never seemed dearer to her.

They were sitting in a secluded corner in the restaurant, close to a window. They had had to weave their way to this particular spot through a series of other tables nearer at hand, and cross the space in the middle of the room that was cleared for dancing. It was when the music had stopped, after a waltz, to which two or three couples had been dancing, that Reba took a sip of water and then began.



"Do you mind my speaking about something?"

"What is it, Becky?" Chadwick Booth asked her, gently patronizing, as he surveyed her approvingly, leaning back in his chair, with his two hands shoved comfortably into his trousers' pockets.

"Well," she went on, glancing down at the silver by her plate, "I didn't know until to-day that you were married," she brought out.

Chadwick Booth didn't change his easy attitude—just smiled.

"Didn't you, Becky? That's flattering."

"Flattering?" she murmured, glancing up and then down again.

"Yes. For two reasons. First, because it proves that domesticity isn't stamped all over me, and second because it's rather nice to be found desirable for my own modest attributes. You see, usually, Becky, I'm desirable because I'm the husband of my more desirable wife."

She winced at his easy use of these terms to her, but she got little meaning from his words.

"I didn't know you had a—— I didn't know," she broke off, "until to-day, but what you were just——" She stopped.

There was something about her voice that made Chadwick Booth remove his hands from his pockets, and sit up.

"Why, my dear Becky," he exclaimed, "I thought of course you knew," which to do him full credit was true, at least until lately.

It didn't seem reasonable to him that she could live in Boston, and not be aware of the existence of his wife. He could no more have married the prominent



daughter of the prominent Archibald Cross, without becoming notorious, than he could have established the Statue of Liberty's torch in his home without broadcast advertisement. Becky read the papers with refreshing punctiliousness, and the name of Mrs. Chadwick Booth appeared every week, during the season, in the society columns. Reba's acquired daily reading of the papers, however, did not include the society columns. She skipped them absolutely along with the sporting-page.

"I thought you couldn't help but know," Chadwick Booth went on. "And, besides, I was always talking about the closed house, and how forlorn it was, and how, if my family insisted upon running off to Bar Harbor for a good time, I intended to have a little good time *here*. Don't you remember?"

She nodded. "But I thought it was your mother and father. I didn't know it was your very *own* family."

"Well," Chadwick Booth reached over and patted her hand, "being married doesn't make me any less fond of you, Becky. Did you think it might?"

She quivered at his touch, and raised her eyes to him, full of hope. Then bravely and simply she asked him:

"Are you unhappily married?"

He laughed softly outloud at the concern in her voice.

"Oh, don't waste any of your sweet sympathy on me, Becky. I'm no more unhappily married than the majority. In fact, sometimes I think I'm more fortunate than most. Virginia's such a good sport."



The conversation was not taking the course that Reba had anticipated, and she felt bewildered.

"A good sport," she groped. "You mean——"

"I mean that Virginia is perfectly willing to allow me *my* little affairs, just so I allow her *hers*. So we get on very amicably. Are really on the best of terms now, and when we are obliged to appear at functions together, do so very creditably."

"Is this—this—— I mean our being together this summer, one of the 'little affairs'?" Reba asked miserably.

"Oh, oh, Becky!" smiled Chadwick Booth, shaking his head at her accusingly. "Jealous? Is that it? Listen to me," he said, with assumed gravity. "Our being together this summer is one of the biggest 'little affairs' I've ever had. I only meant to amuse you for an evening or two, and myself, too," he admitted, shrugging, "and here you have walked straight into my affections."

Reba clasped her hands together in her lap. The waiter had arrived. He placed before her a tomato stuffed with something green and yellow. There were two slim fish crossed on top of it.

"Try that," exclaimed Chadwick Booth, good-humoredly, nodding toward the plate before her. "I think you'll find it rather good."

Mechanically Reba reached for her fork and sampled a bit of the peculiar combination. It had a sharp, highly cultivated sort of flavor. It burned her tongue. But somehow she swallowed the morsel.

"Do you like it?" Chadwick Booth smiled at her.

She was unaware of his question, was conscious only of a smarting sensation of tongue, and throat, and heart—yes, heart too! She gulped down a little



water. Then in a voice she hardly recognized as her own she asked again, to be sure she was not mistaken, "So—so you are not unhappily married at all?"

"Becky," replied Chadwick Booth, "there are not many Robert-and-Elizabeth-Browning marriages in the world. You'll find that out for yourself, some day, poor girl, I suppose. It's in friendships, comradeships, such as ours where you'll find most of what you call happiness. For we meet for no other reason than for happiness' sake. You and I have nothing to haggle over, and argue about. That's the beauty of it. No furnace, nor hot-water system that you've got to heckle me to attend to. No children's education to discuss, and disagree upon. Nothing of that sort." Then abruptly he broke off. "Come, let's not lose this. It's a waltz."

Reba shook her head. "No—no—please—not now. I'd rather not dance just now."

Chadwick Booth frowned, and an expression of annoyance crossed his features.

"Look here, you aren't going to be absurd, are you?"

"No," she assured him. "No, I'm not. Only—I'd really like to finish *this*." And she nodded down at the tongue-biting stuffed tomato on her plate.

The frown on Chadwick Booth's face deepened as he suspiciously surveyed Reba. Then briefly to the waiter, "Bring me another cocktail," he said.

Reba had never seen Chadwick Booth annoyed with her before. But he was now. She was sure of it. She had observed that look on his face when waiters in restaurants failed to please him. But what could she do? What could she say? She pecked at the tomato before her, once or twice, then frankly gave it up. She



tasted, too, the steaming soup that appeared before her, was conscious later of the fragrance of broiled chicken, and dimly aware how easily the ivory-handled, steel knife cut through its tender joints; tried to swallow a mouthful of the young juicy flesh; but she couldn't eat. She felt as if she could never eat again.

"For heaven's sake," she heard Chadwick Booth exclaim impatiently. "Whatever is the matter, Becky?"

What was the *matter*? Could he ask, when all about her in smoking ruins lay her shattered hopes, and fallen ideals, and she was bleeding to death beneath them?

"Nothing. Nothing's the matter," she heard her voice reply.

Chadwick Booth shrugged at that. "You've got a lot to learn, I'm afraid," he informed her.

"I suppose so," she agreed.

"I'm extremely sorry," he pursued, in a voice that stung Reba with its formality, "if you've been laboring under a misapprehension this summer, but really, my dear girl, I haven't *tried* to deceive you for one instant. There's no real harm been done, anyhow, as far as I can see."

Oh, why flay and torture her further? "Oh, don't talk about it." She shivered slightly.

"Is the wind too much for you from that window?" civilly and icily Chadwick Booth inquired.

"No," Reba told him. "It isn't too much."

Then, "One whisky and soda," she heard him order from the waiter. "And put down that window," he went on imperiously, "and remove some of these superfluous dishes." He waved his sensitive hands before him. "And where's the salad I ordered? Why all this delay? And when I specified fresh butter,



why do you bring us salt? And don't you see we're out of ice? Send the head-waiter over here. This service is abominable!"

Later—some time after the arrival of the siphon, upon the nickel top of which, to steady herself, Reba riveted her gaze—Chadwick Booth's mood changed again. Suddenly he reached across the white cloth, and laid his hand, palm upward, before Reba, and when he spoke his voice was full of gentleness and remorse.

"Oh, Becky, please forgive my nasty temper. Please. Don't punish me any more. Don't let's throw away the whole evening. I ought not to be annoyed with you at all. It was only, dear Becky, that I begrudged wasting a single one of our precious minutes together, on things and people outside our friendship. They seemed so *very* far outside to-night, Becky. Our friendship has grown to mean a lot to me, and it isn't going to grow to mean less, just because summer is over. We're going to have some rare hours together, this fall and winter, somehow. And, Becky, please listen—I'm fonder of you than I could ever possibly be if our hours together were interrupted with domestic trivialities. And there's nothing wrong nor forbidden in our innocent playing together either. Don't get that notion into your little head. Everything is all right. Everything is *going* to be all right, too. O come, please be generous. Please come and dance."

He shoved his outstretched hand a bit nearer to her, as if to urge her to put hers into it, and give him permission to lead her to the floor.

Reba gazed at it, as if it belonged to a stranger.

"No, thanks. No. I don't believe I'll dance just now."



"Of course you will," he retorted fiercely, tenderly too; and suddenly imprisoning her passive hand lying nearby upon the cloth, he rose, and stepped around to her; and still holding her hand pulled her to her feet. "Of course you will," he went on earnestly, leaning so close that she could catch the odor of his breath. "You don't know what you'll do. You don't know what you want. But *I* do. *I* know. Becky, I'm fonder of you than ever to-night. Come!" And he drew her toward the floor.

She could not well resist, not while he held her hand like that, not while his eyes so vehemently insisted. But as she felt his arms surround her, and swing her into the maelstrom of dancers that now crowded the small dancing-space, she felt ashamed.

Round and round he bore her—would the music never stop?—round and round, holding her so close that she feared that the effect of what made his breath smell sweet like that, would be observed by others, and the manner of their dancing become conspicuous. Oh, how could he pull her out to be stared and gaped at? She felt as if she were being dragged through a mire, over and over again, in sight of hundreds of gazing faces, and each time as they passed the noisy corner where the music was placed, she felt as if she were a little less white, a little less clean than the time before.

Reba had not passed twice around the dancing-space with Chadwick Booth before she began scheming how she could escape. The more ashamed she felt, the more necessary it seemed to run and hide herself somewhere. She must get away. She must get away from this man and place as soon as possible. She could not dance with him again. She could not ride back to



Boston beside him in the closed car. She could not even exchange words with him, it seemed to her. She must get away. Somehow she must get away. The necessity of immediate escape put courage into her, helped her to act with caution, and amazing calmness.

It was after the music had stopped, and Chadwick Booth and Reba had wended their way back to the table, that Reba remarked before sitting down: "I'm so warm perhaps I'd better slip on my sweater. I left it upstairs, in the dressing-room."

"I wish I could get it," solicitously he told her. Then looking into her eyes, "Am I forgiven *now*, dear Becky?" he asked in a low voice.

She let her gaze sink into his, as she knew how to do now. She recoiled from this kind of deceit, but she must throw him off the scent somehow.

"Yes," she replied sweetly. "You're forgiven *now*."

"Don't be long!" he whispered exultantly.

"I won't," she smiled, and left him.



## CHAPTER XXVI

**I**T was when she had gotten as far as the door that led into the hall that she saw Louise Bartholomew. She was seated at a table with a dozen or so other young people, who evidently had run over from some nearby summer colony for an evening of dancing. Reba knew by the expression on Louise's face that she must have been aware of her presence there for some time. She gave no start of surprise as their eyes met. Reba smiled faintly at her, and passed swiftly out into the hall. She did not mount the stairs to the dressing-room, but immediately approached the outside door, and went out onto the long veranda. She walked the length of it, and down the few steps at the far end, which led to the large open parking-space, well-filled now with a confusing lot of automobiles, and a few chauffeurs. Reba did not know just where Chadwick Booth had left his car. She had not been with him then, but she knew its number and appearance. Besides, there was the little green cross to simplify her search still more.

She discovered the car inside of three minutes hidden behind two limousines, and quickly went up to it. Chadwick Booth had taken the precaution to lock both of the doors, and for a moment Reba feared that it would be necessary for her to leave behind the motor-coat and silk sweater, which she was very well aware was rolled up inside the coat. She observed, however, that one of the glass windows was not quite closed,



and stepping up onto the running-board, Reba slipped her fingers into the tiny space at the top of the window and slipped it down, leaned as far forward as she could, and with a little spring caught hold of a corner of the yellow coat, and dragged it towards her; then pushed up the window again, hopped down from the step, and with both coat and sweater safely over her arm hurried swiftly away.

It was a dark moonless night, and the narrow country road that wound for several miles over rough and uninhabited woodlands was infrequently lighted. Reba knew that there was but one road that approached the restaurant, so she could not lose her way in the apparent wilderness that surrounded her. She knew too that once she reached the state-road there was located a railroad station not far away, for often parties came out from town to dine at the restaurant, and were met at this station by the establishment's motor-bus. But whether she should turn to the left or right when she reached the main highway Reba had no idea. As she scurried along the dark road, it occurred to her as fortunate that she had chanced to bring her shopping-bag with her. But for the sailor's wedding-ring which had necessitated some sort of receptacle she might have been without railroad fare. There was at least ten dollars inside her bag.

Reba was not afraid to walk the dark country roads about Ridgefield on moonless nights, and she told herself there was nothing to be afraid of here. And she wasn't afraid at first. It was when the lights of an approaching automobile appeared around an abrupt curve, that her heart suddenly jerked. She stepped back quickly out of sight behind some bushes, but after



the automobile had passed, her heart was pounding hard. This wasn't a road where women were often found walking alone, she imagined. Vague fears took possession of her. Still she pushed on, ears and eyes alert, stopping every now and then to listen and darting quickly out of sight into a dark shadow at every sound that might prove to be an automobile.

Once the sudden flash of the headlight of an automobile from behind caught her before she had a chance to retreat, and the car itself was beside her, and had slipped past, in an instant. When she observed it slow down, fifty yards or so in front of her, and stop, she stood still in her tracks a second, and contemplated plunging into the dense woods. For whoever was driving the car had reversed his engine, and Reba observed that its tail-light was slowly approaching her. Panic-stricken, she stood her ground, however, and waited.

"Can't we give you a lift?" a man's voice suddenly called out, when within speaking distance.

Somehow Reba managed a controlled reply. "No, thank you."

"Better let us."

"No, thank you."

"Just to the state-road?"

"No, thank you," still she insisted. And finally—oh, finally—she heard the relieving sound of grinding gears, and the car moved away.

It was after that, that she wondered if, after all, the dark tangle of underbrush and trees, through which the road was cut, would not prove safer. If only she had enough courage to brave the solitude of some secluded copse, until dawn, her common-sense told her that nothing would molest her in the woods. But after



five minutes of close crouching beneath some alder-bushes she sought the road again, as an escape from the frightening weirdness of her hiding-place.

She hurried fast after that, almost running, falling down once or twice as her foot caught in a root, or on the edge of a protruding stone, all the while biting her under-lip hard to keep her teeth from chattering. She might have lost control of herself long before she reached the state-road, but for the steadying effect of the second automobile that passed her. There was plenty of time to conceal herself this time, and she was well hidden behind a screen of grapevines as it overtook her. When she comprehended the reason of the car's low speed, her teeth stopped chattering instantly, as if she had been plunged into icy water, or in some equally effective manner shocked out of her gathering hysteria. It was Chadwick Booth's car! He was hunting for her, slowly searching the road on either side!

She hadn't considered until now the effect of her flight upon Chadwick Booth. She had been too intent on getting away from him. But of course he would hunt for her, when she failed to return. She must have been gone now, she figured (it was too dark to read the time upon her wrist), nearly an hour. He had, she concluded, found her coat missing from the automobile, and drawn his conclusions. The realization that she had successfully evaded him, made her forget for a while vaguer dangers, and she pursued her way with more confidence.

It was, however, with a very long deep sigh of relief when Reba finally broke out upon the state-road. Here there was at least an even road-bed, with reassuring white fences gleaming dimly now and then, and



electric-lights occasionally, to read the time by. Only half-past ten! Reba took heart. Surely there would be a late train returning to town, from wherever the railroad station was situated. Three automobiles whizzed sharply past her as she stood looking up and down the long straight road, uncertain in which direction to go. If she had been a man she had only to step out into the middle of the road, and hail any one of the automobiles that came by, and ask the way to the nearest railway station, but a woman—at least she, Reba Jerome—dared not do a thing like that. She turned north. In that direction lay Boston anyhow.

Reba was fortunate in her choice. She had walked only a quarter of a mile when she met a white horse drawing a buggy, well filled with a man, a large woman, and a small boy crammed in between. Reba inquired of this reassuring loadful, if there was a railroad station nearby, and the man's voice replied:

"Yes. Quarter mile or so further on, and turn in to yer right by some ice-houses."

"And is there a train to Boston, do you think, to-night?" asked Reba.

"Yes," the man assured her, "at twenty minutes after eleven, or thereabouts."

"And does it surely stop at this station?"

"Yes. Only station fifteen miles further on, or six miles back, it does stop at. You'll ketch yer train all right, ma'am. Depot ain't fifteen minutes' walk away."

"Oh, thank you."

"You're welcome. Git up, Nancy."

When Reba came in sight of the solitary little country station, dimly lighted and standing quite by itself beside the railroad track, she came in sight too of Chad-



wick Booth's automobile, drawn up close beside the little building. He was there waiting for her, having concluded, no doubt, that she had procured some sort of conveyance, and would arrive at the station in time for the Boston train.

Reba's one idea was to escape from Chadwick Booth, and it so completely possessed her that she did not even consider boldly approaching the station and in spite of his protests boarding the train.

Instead she ran forward quickly into the huge black shadow of a mastodon ice-house, and, keeping close against its wall, sped like some silent-footed yellow moth along its side, until a huge yawning door offered sudden refuge.

From this dark retreat Reba watched the train pull up to the station, stop a moment, and pull away again. Two minutes later, from the same dark hiding-spot, she watched the red tail-light of Chadwick Booth's automobile disappearing toward Boston.



## CHAPTER XXVII

**I**T was after Reba had walked a mile or two more, along the unfamiliar state-road, that her teeth again began to chatter. Another automobile had slowed down beside her, and this time not one masculine voice from its dark interior had addressed her, but two and three, and in a manner less civil than the first man's upon the country road. It was very late—almost twelve now, and very dark. A rain-drop fell on Reba's cheek soon after the carful of urging men had disappeared. There was nothing frightful in a rain-drop, of course, but it started her foolishly hurrying and stumbling again. Her breath came with difficulty in little gasps, and when in the distance she saw approaching a reeling man harmlessly drunk, she thought she should scream with the horror of the place and the hour, and the rain, and she, all unprotected stumbling on blindly, she knew not where, possibly into even worse terrors than she had left behind.

It was soon after the drunken man had passed Reba, with the width of the road between them, and with never as much as a word to her, that she came upon what, in the day time, might prove to be a town. She decided then that she must seek shelter under a roof somewhere, or go mad; and she began to search for a house that presented a friendly front. All the houses were dark and apparently deep in sleep, and as she proceeded she despaired of finding a single spark of life in the part of the town along the state-road.



When a light did appear ahead of her at last, gleaming dimly but steadily, she hurried eagerly toward it. It was with a wave of thanksgiving that she read beneath the light, "Grand Hotel. Rooms and lodging. Open all the year." True, the part of the hotel that the light illuminated was anything but "grand." The few wooden steps that led to its front door were worn and very shabby, and the railing that ran along what was supposed to represent a veranda was in a disreputable state of unrepair. Still, it did offer a roof, and there was a light not only over the door, but also shining in two or three of its windows.

Reba mounted the steps. As she did so, she heard a loud raucous laugh from within—a man's laugh, followed by the high shrill cackle of a woman. Looking through the open door of the "Grand Hotel," Reba saw near the end of its dimly lighted corridor a sign protruding, reading, "Bar." She hesitated, turning toward the dark road again. It was raining in earnest now. She caught the first low rumble of thunder.

"Oh, I can't! I can't go out into that again," she whispered, and turned toward the entrance of the Grand Hotel.

Before rapping on the loose-jointed screen-door, however, Reba armored herself as best she knew how. Recalling her wedding-ring in the bottom of her shopping-bag, she took it out, and slipped it onto the third finger of her left hand.

A very large fat man in shirtsleeves, holding aloft a small old-fashioned kerosene lamp, responded to Reba's rap. He came out of the bar-room, and standing under the sign that designated it, called out gruffly, toward the front door, "Anybody there?"



"Yes, there is," replied Reba.

"Shut up, you fellers," he ordered, turning toward the bar; then approached the screen door and opened it. He looked down at Reba in frank amazement. Then, "Party of you?" he asked, and looked past her, toward the street.

"No, I'm alone," said Reba. "I missed the last train to Boston, and so—I saw this, was a hotel, and ——— Could I have a room?" she broke off.

"Well, now," replied the man, still staring in amazement. "I guess so. We'll see. Come right in, miss. Come right in. Guess we can fix you up. Lost the last train, did yer? Well now! That was too bad. Come into the office."

Reba followed her escort into a bare little room with a few settees (the kind they used in the vestry in the Congregational Church at home) placed around the edge of it, and one or two brown mottled spittoons in front of the settees. In one corner of the room there was a high desk with a stool drawn up to it. The man placed the lamp on the desk, stuffed his hands into his pockets, and surveyed Reba.

"So you want a room, miss, do yer?"

"Yes. Haven't you got one? For if you haven't" (again Reba heard a shrill laugh from the bar-room) "I'll go. I'll go right off."

"Oh, we got one all right," reassured the fat man. "We've got one—real nice one. Too bad yer lost yer train," he remarked, still staring frankly at Reba.

"Yes," she acknowledged briefly.

The fat man scratched his head reflectively. "'Course we like our guests to register usually." He squinted up his eyes at Reba. "Any objections?"



"No," promptly Reba replied.

The fat man swung the huge book on top of the desk around to Reba, and dipped a rusty pen into a muddy mixture, in a besmeared inkwell.

Reba laid her left hand prominently upon the desk and wrote with some difficulty, but clearly, "Mrs. Nathaniel Cawthorne, Ridgefield, Mass."

"Oh, *missis*, is it?" inquired the fat man, after inspecting the signature, and still eyeing his guest curiously. "Well, *missis*, come up and I'll show yer what we got."

As Reba mounted the creaky flight of stairs she caught a glimpse of the inside of the noisy bar-room, through the open door, and closed her eyes suddenly, as if they had been burned. There were half a dozen or more men in the room, and two girls, or women—at least something in skirts. Reba shuddered and followed the fat man, but she felt such a wave of faintness pass over her that she grasped the infirm railing by her side for support. She followed her guide dumbly (numbly, too, after that) through narrow corridors that turned and turned, to left and right, to right and left, on and on.

Reba had never seen anything in the way of bedrooms that was more repulsive than the hole the fat man finally showed her into. It smelled of stale tobacco, and something else, musty and stifling. There was a long jagged crack across the cheap mirror that was hung askew over a broken-legged set of drawers. The bed was so misshapen and deformed that it recalled to Reba the image of a humpbacked idiot that she had once seen grovelling around the Poor Farm in Ridgefield. Its linen was dirty, too. The pillow-



covers were wrinkled, and even in the dim light of the fat man's lamp, which he left with Reba, she could see that the grimy spread had an oily stain on the center of it. On the edge of the untidy commode there was a half-smoked cigar, and an empty bottle beside it. But she locked herself in, with all this squalor, with no word of complaint to the proprietor. When the sound of his footsteps had died away, along the labyrinthine corridors, Reba went over to the window and raised it, placing the piece of kindling-wood which she had found upon the sill, beneath the sash to keep it up. Then she drew the only chair, converted from a porch-rocker into a straight-backed, short-legged affair, close to the window, and sat down.

She could not *lie* down, of course—not on that bed. She could not undress in such a place. She did take off the white suede pumps, however, smeared and begrimed now from her long walk, and placed them side by side at the foot of the bed. Then as quickly as possible she blew out the lamp, covering with a blanket of darkness the awful surroundings.

It flashed across the tortured Reba that to find herself in such a bedroom as this, forced to listen to the laughter, and shrill, delirious shrieks that issued now and again from the bar-room below, her eyes still smarting from what she had seen in that bar-room, was but the just outcome of her relations with Chadwick Booth. The forbiddenness of those relations loomed up before Reba in enormous proportions.

Why, he had never meant to marry her! It had never even occurred to him to make her his wife! And she—*she*—had let herself drink deep and long of the permeating sweetness of every one of his ca-



resses, had rehearsed afterward for hours and hours every slight swift touch of his hands, every long lingering pressure of his lips, with an unrestraint, an abandon that only a betrothal of marriage could make right. In her imagination Reba had been betrothed to Chadwick Booth ever since that night beside the sea; had been ready to face the possible disgrace of divorce without a quiver; had secretly, joyfully, wondered to herself, as higher and higher she built her castle, if she could create sometime, with *him*, something of the atmosphere that pervaded the Park home. Had gone into minute details.

Reba suddenly leaned forward in the broken old chair and buried her face in her hands! This horrible endless night was the culmination of all her dreams—this dirty bedroom, this stale smell of old tobacco, that room below, that woman down there with the red plaid skirt and disheveled hair whom she had caught a glimpse of, laughing and singing, perched on a man's knee—oh, the shame—the degrading shame of it!

As Reba sat and listened to the uproariousness in the bar-room below, she was lashed again and again by Chadwick Booth's casual explanation of his relations to her. Why, those creatures down there—that man and that woman were not annoyed by the discussion of domestic trivialities either! They also were not married, nor obliged to haggle about children. They too met for happiness' sake! What difference—what difference *really* between that woman down there and her—Reba Jerome?

"It's just as if I looked into a mirror, when I looked



into that room down there, and I'm uglier than I thought!"

Of course Reba was being cruel to herself, harsh and unjust, but there lay buried in her the instincts of generation upon generation of New England ancestors, and on this night of her disillusionment they rose up and cried out in protesting chorus.

It was not until the sky began to show the faint gray light of dawn, and the noise in the bar-room had stopped, that Reba fell asleep for an hour or so, her head resting against the window-casing, and her hands limp and tired lying upturned in her lap.

The sun was shining strong and clear, and beautifully undisturbed by soiled linen, upon the pillows of the bed, when Reba woke up. She drew in a deep sigh of relief at the assurance that the night was over. For a moment or two, as she gazed at one stray sunbeam lying in her lap in such a casual fashion, it seemed to her as if the last twenty-four hours must have been a nightmare, and in a moment the cracked mirror and tipsy-looking set of drawers would fade away and in their place appear the familiar chiffonier in her room at the Alliance.

She moved her hands, but the cracked mirror didn't disappear. She rubbed her eyes,—it was all true. Even her hair was proof of that. It had slipped down, and lay in a loose untidy roll upon her shoulder. Reba looked at her watch. Eight o'clock! So late? Time for breakfast! Swiftly her thoughts shot forward over the miles, to the pleasant sunlit dining-room at the Alliance, filled at this instant with the fragrance of coffee, and the pleasant chatter of several dozen girls.



The realization that she would not be there laid its cold hold upon Reba's drowsy consciousness. She sat up abruptly. Her absence would be sure to be observed. Mamie would carry coffee and toast on a tray up to her room within half an hour, as she often did if she slept over. She would find the room empty! The bed undisturbed! At half-past nine, a short hour and a half from now, when prayers were held in the Alliance parlors, conducted this month by Miss Ellsworth, Mamie would, no doubt, report her absence to the General Secretary!

Reba had not thought of this last night when she had let that train speed away without her. She recalled now with what quiet earnestness and persistence Miss Ellsworth had set to work hunting for a girl a year ago, who failed to return to her room one night, never reporting afterward where they had found her, nor explaining why she never came back to the Alliance as a lodger again. They would begin to hunt for *her*, in the same grim determined way, Reba concluded. And one of the steps they would take, it flashed across her with sickening certainty, would be to communicate with Louise Bartholomew! And Louise had seen her last night!

As Reba pictured herself returning to the Alliance, awaited by anxious watchers, questioned by suspicious investigators, forced to explain her absence, and expose the pitiful story of her disillusionment, she recoiled. Her desire to conceal herself, hide her suffering, was as instinctive as with a hurt animal. Besides, might they not doubt her story? Might they not think about *her* the awful thing Mamie had thought about that other girl, who had not come back



all night? To clear away their doubts it would not be improbable for them to come here to this awful hotel, and talk with the fat proprietor. They would discover her signature in the register! She would be forced to tell them about Nathaniel Cawthorne! What excuse, *then*, could she give to Miss Ellsworth and Louise, for receiving attentions from Chadwick Booth? She could not plead innocence of the knowledge of her own marriage, could she?

"No, no, I can't go back," Reba whispered to herself. "I'd rather stay here in this hotel forever and ever than go back!"

After Louise's reprimand, and all that had happened since, Reba felt sure that it could be only after a long and painful investigation that Miss Ellsworth would consider her suitable for a secretaryship at the Alliance. And if finally she was allowed a second trial, could she, she asked herself, endure meeting Chadwick Booth two and three times a week, as he passed in and out of the classrooms? He could not well give up his classes at the Alliance. It was fall, the beginning of a busy new year. Classes were just being formed, and doctors were greatly in demand with their ranks already depleted by the ever-increasing number of units sailing for France.

"No, I can't go back," whispered Reba again. "I can't *ever* go back. But oh——" She looked despairingly about the unlovely room. "Of course I can't stay *here*! What can I do? Where can I go?"



## CHAPTER XXVIII

AT that moment she heard a distant bell, ringing. It had a high, whining tone, vaguely familiar. Reba listened to it for a minute, searching her memory desultorily. Was it like some bell in the city? Or was it—she had it now. It was like the bell in the Catholic church in Ridgefield.

Reba used to like to hear the Catholic church-bells ringing on a Sunday morning at home. They rang earlier than the other bells—during that quiet, after-breakfast hour, when she was seated in her bedroom reading her Bible—the bedroom furnished with the rose-decorated bed and bureau, marble-topped table, black walnut rocker, and flowered Brussels carpet. How pretty she used to think that carpet was! The sound of this church bell, so like the one at home, recalled to Reba her girlhood room in all its clean orderliness. She saw herself sitting in it, in the low rocker, reading her Bible by the window overlooking the mills. She contemplated the picture for five long minutes, as long as the whining church-bell rang, and afterward she exclaimed softly, "Why, I'll go home!" The very thought of the rigor and sternness of the atmosphere of 89 Chestnut Street acted upon her now as an antidote for the oversweet poison of Chadwick Booth's forbidden caresses. The cold gray house with its granite steps and concrete walks offered a kind of convent peace to Reba. "Yes, I'll go home," she said again.



Her mind leaped to details. Luckily she was provided with money. It was still early in the day. Sunday. True. There were fewer trains on Sunday. Still, there might be a way of getting to Ridgefield before evening; and by some round-about route, too, which avoided Boston. Reba wished to avoid Boston—especially its railroad stations. The time that other girl had failed to come back to her room at the Alliance, all the stations in the city were under constant watch. She was afraid of the very thought of capture. Oh, if once she could reach Ridgefield, if once she could conceal herself deep within the gray impenetrable walls of 89 Chestnut Street, then let them search to their hearts' content, then let them suspect and surmise the worst of her. Once in the little rocking-chair, overlooking the rumbling mills, Reba felt she would be safe from grilling questions, from she knew not what riddling reprimands. Safe, too, from any possible encounter with blue, brown-flecked eyes—hard with displeasure, or gentle with pity, she knew not which.

She got up, ready for action. She was thoroughly aroused and alert now, and she told herself, as she pinned up her hair, put on her shoes, and bathed her face gingerly with a corner of the dampish towel which she dipped into the half-filled water-pitcher, that she must act wisely, not lose her head. She must go downstairs and show no nervousness to the hotel-proprietor, station-agent, or whoever did help her with the puzzling time-tables. Also, she must send some sort of word as soon as possible to the Alliance, explaining her absence. She thought first of calling Mamie immediately by telephone, but what excuse



could she give Mamie for her presence here? She must make no such blunder as that! Louise Bartholomew, if on her scent at all, would be sure to take note of the place from which she called Mamie, and its proximity to the resort where she had discovered her last night with Dr. Booth. Better wait until this town, whatever and wherever it was, was well behind her, Reba concluded.

It was after some minutes' careful consideration that she finally decided that a letter to Miss Ellsworth would arouse the least suspicion—a brief, non-committal letter. Reba was always brief and non-committal. They wouldn't wonder at that. It happened that Miss Ellsworth had spoken to her but a week ago, about her vacation, saying she could fill her place without inconvenience just at present. True, Reba had told her she didn't want the vacation, but her mother's illness would be excuse enough to offer for her change of mind, also for the suddenness of her leave-taking.

She must get hold of some blank paper and an envelope downstairs somewhere and write to Miss Ellsworth at once, and if it were possible to reach Ridgefield by evening, her letter bearing the postmark of the home-town would be in Miss Ellsworth's Monday morning mail. Corroborating this letter would be a postcard, mailed also in Ridgefield, to Mamie, asking her to pack her trunk for her and send it along. All these details of procedure presented themselves to Reba before she had left the miserable hotel-room.

When at last she found herself seated on the dark red plush seat of a jerky way-train, zigzagging a crooked course southwest of Boston, she drew in a deep sigh. But it was not a sigh of relief. A day



of uncertainties lay before her. There were four changes and four long waits of varying length, in four strange towns along her circuitous route, before she connected finally with the last train, due in Ridgefield at seven thirty-two, that evening. There was a very likely possibility that she might fail to connect with one of the trains. The thought of spending another night in an unknown town made Reba grip hold tight of the nickel-finished seat-arm.

Ten dollars would not last indefinitely! How did one pawn things, if it should come to that? And where? And were pawn-shops open on Sunday? Unbelievable, and yet consistent with all that had gone before, she supposed that she should find herself contemplating such a contingency. She shuddered slightly inside her warm yellow coat. Why did the conductor look at her so sharply when he took her ticket? Why did that man sitting alone three seats ahead keep turning around? And what were the two women in the seat opposite thinking of her when they stared at her crumpled yellow finery, and whispered afterwards? What were they thinking of her back at the Alliance? They, whose opinions she valued so highly, what were *they* saying? What were *they* suspecting?

Nothing very dreadful. Reba could have been spared much of her suffering that Sunday had she known that Mamie had slept over until noon that day, and when she did burst into Reba's room, at about one o'clock, to borrow a safety-pin, had thought nothing of the undisturbed bed. It presented to her eyes its usual Sunday-noon appearance. There was no hectic search at all for Rebecca Jerome at the Women's



Alliance. Her absence was not even noted until after breakfast on Monday. But she could not be aware of this, and all day long she flayed and whipped herself with lurid imaginings.

That Sunday journey left an everlasting impression upon Reba. The long forced hours of self-examination, self-condemnation, left tracks upon her soul. It was a hot, wilting sort of day, and the dust and cinders that blew into the open car-windows, her untidy hair (she had had no comb except her fingers), her soiled white shoes, soiled white gloves, added to her inner feeling of moral dilapidation. Her all-day fast, too, interrupted only by a banana from a fruit-store that chanced to be open in the second little town, and a package of pressed figs, and a cake of sweet chocolate from a news-stand in the only station along her route that offered any such luxury, did much toward weakening her spirit, as well as her body.

It was about half-past three in the afternoon, after she had been sitting for a long hour in a corner of a deserted ladies' waiting-room, staring fixedly into a shaft of sunshine, in which a myriad of dust motes scurried aimlessly about in a confused fashion, like the wreckage of her own hopes, she thought, that she roused herself and set out for a walk along the elm-shaded main street of the unfamiliar town. There was a whole hour and a half before her train was due.

She had not walked far when she came upon a little white-steepled church. Its doors were open. A service was taking place within, and its cool dark interior was inviting to Reba. She entered and sat down alone in a back seat. A small assembly was gathered in the church to observe holy communion. Reba re-



called now that it was the first Sunday in September.

It had been a long time since she had attended a communion service. She had felt shy about taking part in so intimate a ceremony in the big imposing city churches, and had always withdrawn. She was, however, a member of the Ridgefield Congregational Church, and had been, ever since she was thirteen years old. She never missed a single communion service at home. This little white-steepled, cool-shadowed church, into which Reba had wandered, was of her own denomination, and when the kind-faced, white-haired old deacon offered her the silver plate piled high with holy white bread it seemed more natural to accept a piece of it than to refuse. Reba was instinctively religious, and never before had she been in such need of religion as to-day. Never before had the words of the old familiar hymn, which, here, just as at home in Ridgefield, the church choir sang over the silently-bowed heads of the congregation, "Just as I am, without one plea," been so full of meaning to her. The church with its cool shadows, long silences, interrupted by such sweetly familiar sounds as the silvery gurgle of grape-juice flowing into deep goblets, the repetition of familiar Scriptural passages, the music of old hymns, over-sentimental though they may be, acted like spiritual food upon Reba. And when she emerged again upon the elm-shaded street, she was strangely strengthened and renewed. A peculiar calm took the place of her forebodings, a peculiar feeling of indifference to the conclusions about her back at the Alliance possessed her, a miraculous peace fell upon her, like sleep upon a tired and exhausted traveler.



The congregation had risen at parting, and as usual had sung in unison, "Blest be the tie that binds," and a little later, sitting by the car-window of the last train that was so fast bearing her back to the protection of her people, Reba repeated the words of the first stanza of that hymn, softly to herself. And as she gazed out of the car-window, at the hills drawing in closer and closer to the railroad track, growing more and more familiar with their slanting pasturage, climbing stone-walls, splotches of dark green juniper, and patches of gray rock, breaking through here and there, a wave of love for her rugged home-country, of kindredship for her rugged home-people, rugged home-ideals, never mind how "narrow" according to city standards, swept over Reba Jerome.

When she stepped out at last on the old well-known platform, and Tom, the baggage-master, glanced up and smiled at her, and said casually, "How d'yer do, Miss Reba. This is a surprise, ain't it?" Reba felt a timid desire to take his gnarled, baggage-bruised hands in both hers, and exclaim, "Oh, blest be the tie that binds!"

After slipping her letters to Miss Ellsworth and Mamie into the station mail-box, she proceeded on foot directly to her father's house. It wasn't until she saw the light dimly glowing in the vestibule of the side door of 89 Chestnut Street that she considered the difficulty of explaining her sudden home-coming to her people. But she considered it with no slackening of her step. They would have to take her in. She was theirs—belonged to them by blood. And all that mattered to Reba then was that she *was* taken in, *given* a refuge, she cared not how nor in



what manner. Let them receive her scornfully, triumphantly, if they wanted to—what did it matter? What did anything matter now?

Cousin Syringa opened the door in answer to her ring.

“My lands!” she exclaimed. “We wan’t expecting you!”

Before Reba had a chance to reply, Aunt Augusta appeared on the threshold of her mother’s room, peering out into the hall to find out who in the world could be ringing the bell on a Sunday at such an hour.

“Well, of all things!” Reba heard her exclaim, and suddenly two other figures appeared framed in two other door-ways—a stooped old man’s, and an egg-shaped woman’s. They all stared in silence at the yellow apparition before them.

“Who is it? What’s the trouble? Why don’t somebody come and tell me what’s the matter?” a whining voice complained from the room behind Aunt Augusta.

“It’s only I, Mother,” called Reba; and she crossed the hall and went into her mother’s room, Augusta stepping aside to allow her to pass. She went straight over to her mother’s wheel-chair drawn up as usual close to the green-shaded drop-light. “See!” she said.

“You!” exclaimed her mother, blinking up at her. “Why, we didn’t know you were coming!”

“We got no letter,” announced Aunt Emma. They had all followed Reba into the invalid’s room—all but Augusta.

“What’s it mean?” she demanded, not stirring from her place by the door.

“Why, just that I’ve come home,” Reba announced



quietly. "I didn't write. I decided suddenly. I've come to stay," she added.

"To stay? How long?" gasped the invalid.

"Oh, I don't know. Forever, perhaps. I'm through at the Alliance."

Abruptly Aunt Augusta crossed the room, approached Reba, and placed one hand on her arm, turning her toward the light.

"You been sick, Reba?" she asked.

Reba shook her head. "No, I haven't been sick."

"What does ail you then? What is the trouble?" Aunt Augusta grilled. "And where's your bag? *Why* are you through down there? That's what I want to know. Looks mighty queer to me."

"It does look queer, I guess," acknowledged Reba. "But I've had enough of it. That's all. You can squeeze me in somewhere in this big house, I guess. You'll have to, anyway, because I'm going to stay. I don't care about having my old room back," Reba assured Aunt Augusta. (Cousin Syringa had occupied Reba's room ever since she had left it empty.) "Nor, seeing I've come home to stay, I wouldn't think of sleeping in the spare-chamber either," she went on. "The 'girl's room' is all right for me."

"It ain't any such thing!" expostulated Cousin Syringa. "You'll have your bedroom back, of course, and I'll go into the 'girl's room.' I don't mind the cold."

"Oh, no, Cousin Syringa; I wouldn't let you do that," objected Reba. "I——"

"Look here, you two," broke in Aunt Augusta crisply. "I'll settle that question myself later. You



needn't waste breath on that. You had any supper, Reba?" she demanded.

"No." Reba shook her head.

"Set her place, Syringa," Aunt Augusta ordered.

"Oh, please. Don't bother. Just a glass of milk. I can get it myself."

"Set her place," cut in Aunt Augusta. "You better go upstairs, and wash up," she went on to Reba. "It must have been a pretty dirty trip from the looks. You'll find some of your old dresses hanging up fresh and clean in the upstairs hall-closet. You better put on one, and then come down and have a good hot cup of tea."



## CHAPTER XXIX

**W**ANT me to hook you, or anything?" five minutes later the voice of Aunt Emma asked from outside the bathroom door, where Reba stood looking down at the first dress her hands had fallen upon in the closet—a sprigged muslin, white and crisp from recent laundering. How well she remembered it! How calm and steady her heart-beats had been when she used to wear this dress, on warm Sunday afternoons four or five summers ago! How clean, how chaste she had been then!

"Yes, please," she replied; and slipping the dress over her head, and her arms into the long tight sleeves, she called, "Come in."

She stood passive and silent, while the older woman pulled and tugged at her back.

"My goodness!" Aunt Emma exclaimed at last. "There ain't a bit of use trying to get this together back here. You don't seem to belong to this dress any more, Reba. I had no idea you'd broadened out so."

Reba glanced at her reflection in the oval-tipped, black-walnut mirror over the marble washstand.

"You're right, I guess. I don't belong to this dress any more. Let me get back into the dirty one where I do belong," she said dispassionately.

Everything Reba said that evening was spoken in the same unemotional voice. "Just as if she'd turned



into wood, or pulp, or something," Emma said to Syringa, in discussing it later.

Seated downstairs at the dining-room table, with all three of the sisters hovering about her (her mother had been wheeled into the dining-room when Reba was upstairs) and Syringa appearing now and then from the kitchen, Reba was as composed and tranquil as if it were the usual thing to drop in on her family like this, without bag or baggage, unexpected, and unannounced.

David slunk into the room before Reba had been seated at the table long, on the pretext of asking her for her trunk-check.

"I haven't any check," she replied, coolly. "I haven't brought anything with me. But I've written back to have my things sent, so they'll be here in a day or two."

"Do you mean to tell us you've gone and actually given up your place down there with the Red Cross people?" her dazed father asked for himself.

"I mean to tell you that I'm *going* to give it up. I shall send in my resignation within a week."

"But what are you planning to do around *here*?" after a pause he inquired wonderingly.

"I don't know—just stay here, I suppose."

It was Aunt Augusta's sharp eyes that first spied the wide gold band on Reba's finger. At least it was Aunt Augusta who first spoke of it. Reba had not removed her wedding-ring. There was to be no more deceit about her marriage. In the back seat of the little church, in the dark of her bowed head and closed eyes, while the choir had been singing, Reba had de-



cided that to acknowledge Nathan would be the very least she could do in way of expiation.

"Isn't that something new?" Aunt Augusta inquired, pointing with a long finger at Reba's left hand reaching for the sugar-bowl.

"No, not very. I've had it over three years. It's my wedding-ring."

"Your *what*, did you say?"

"My wedding-ring. I guess I never mentioned to you that I was married."

Aunt Emma and Cousin Syringa sat down abruptly at that.

"Where's your husband, then?" demanded the still-erect Augusta.

Reba took a sip of tea before she answered. It was pretty hot. She poured a little milk into it.

"I don't know exactly."

Queer how detached her steady voice was from herself. Queer she could see and hear so clearly, manage so deftly knife and fork and spoon. It was like being two people—one moving, speaking, answering questions, the other looking on helpless, bleeding and dumb.

"Married? And don't know where your husband is?" pursued Aunt Augusta, incredulously.

Reba nodded.

Aunt Augusta came a step or two nearer.

"Has he left you?" she asked. "Wan't he good to you? You might as well tell us about him. We won't blame you, Reba. Did he treat you wrong some way?" Aunt Augusta's voice was almost gentle.

"Oh, no," Reba told her. "He didn't treat me wrong any way. You see, his business," she ex-



plained, "is on a boat that sails between places in the Pacific. That's why I don't know exactly where he is."

"Oh, that's it; that's it," murmured Aunt Augusta; but she was still mystified. So were the others.

"Was it a secret marriage?" the sharp, high voice of the invalid suddenly broke in.

Reba nodded. "Yes, and I meant to keep it secret till he came back, and we settled down somewhere."

"What made you change your mind, then?" Reba's mother asked. "Sudden, like this?"

For the first time Reba hesitated.

"Yes, what made you change your mind?" repeated the now-aroused David.

Reba's hands slipped down into her lap. Her eyes fixed themselves on the glass knob of a door across the room. She stared at it in silence, but it was not the knob she saw. Oh, how it hurt! Just to think of his eyes—how it hurt! She winced slightly.

"It isn't as if I were young," she said outloud, in that strange dull voice of hers. "I'm too old to get over it—to wake up healed from it some day," mystifyingly to those who listened Reba went on. "I shall never feel the same toward life again. All the beauty has gone out of it now."

The invalid leaned forward in her chair.

"What are you talking about, Reba Jerome?" she called out shrilly.

Reba glanced at her mother unsurprised. What indeed was she talking about? And here, too? She gazed about at the staring faces, then shrugged and actually smiled. Never mind! She didn't care.

"I presume I was just thinking outloud," she said.



Then turning to Aunt Augusta, she asked simply, as if she were a little child again, "Can't I go to bed now? I'm so tired!"

"Answer me, Reba," insisted the invalid irritably. "You answer me. What made you change your mind?"

"You keep still, Eunice," interrupted Augusta's voice peremptorily. "You leave Reba alone. She don't have to tell us all her affairs. Can't you see she's all tuckered out? I should think you'd have more sense. Of course you can go to bed, Reba. Syringa," she ordered, "you go up and get out that nightgown of mine with the acorn design hamburg yoke, in my bottom drawer, and put clean sheets onto Reba's bed, and take your things into the spare-chamber. That'll be your room hereafter."

"Oh, Augusta!" feebly Syringa expostulated. The spare-chamber! Why, Augusta prized her spare-chamber more than the grand piano, or her sealskin coat. To her the possession of a spare-chamber was proof of gentility. She'd as soon go without a dining-room, she had once said. "Let me move into the 'girl's room,'" Syringa urged. "I'll be comfortable enough there. There's that register down into the kitchen, you know, right over the kitchen stove."

"You keep still," briefly Augusta silenced Syringa. "I know what I'm about. 'Tisn't *your* comfort I'm thinking of. Reba's to have her own room, and she is to have it without feeling she's putting an old woman like you, with rheumatism every damp day, into that 'girl's room,' that ain't fit really for even a servant. You go right along and do as I say and no more talk about it."



Thus was the fatted calf killed for Reba, though she herself was hardly aware of it. She sat with her hands still in her lap and her gaze still fastened upon the door-knob. Some one had to touch her to call her back to the present place and moment. "You wanted to go to bed, didn't you?" Syringa asked her.

"Oh, yes; so I did," she replied.

Sweet as the return of the prodigal was to Augusta Morgan, it was in no spirit of triumph or proud victory that the old despot crossed the hall to Reba's room that night, after the crack at the bottom of the girl's door had been dark for over an hour.

"I just thought I'd look in," she explained, "and see if you were asleep yet."

There was a light burning in the hall, and Reba from her bed could see Aunt Augusta standing tall and specter-like in the familiar gray wrapper. "No, I'm not asleep."

Augusta came in.

"I was afraid you wasn't." She had a glass in her hand. "You drink this; it's bromide. Your mother has it to quiet her once in a while."

Reba drank docilely, and lay back again on her pillow.

An hour later, "You asleep yet?" inquired the same gray-clad figure, appearing for the second time on Reba's threshold.

"Not yet."

Aunt Augusta again approached Reba's bed and this time laid her hand upon her forehead. "Why, you're hot!"

A little moan escaped from Reba. Aunt Augusta leaned nearer.



"Tell me if you can. Where do you feel bad?" she asked.

"Here," Reba replied in a whisper, and she placed her hand upon her chest. "It was better for a while this afternoon," she went on; "I hardly felt it. But now it's worse. You wouldn't think it could hurt me, physically, would you?" she asked. "But it does."

Aunt Augusta bent over the bed and shook Reba by the shoulder.

"Reba, look here, look at me," she said in a firm steady voice. "Do you know who I am? Do you know where you are?"

"Of course—of course—you're Aunt Augusta. I'm in my own bed at home. I could see the roses there on the foot-board if there were more light. Oh! I'm in my right mind. Don't be afraid about that. I've come home to stay. You've got your way with me at last. The only funny thing is, I don't seem to care if you have. I don't seem to care about anything around here."



## CHAPTER XXX

AUGUSTA sent for the doctor, in the morning. But he gave her little satisfaction. For ten days he visited the sickroom, the frown between his eyes deepening as the little silver thread of mercury within the slender glass tube climbed gradually higher and higher. And when he finally did arrive at a conclusion it was not a reassuring one—not to Augusta Morgan. It had been typhoid fever that had robbed her, in her early womanhood, of the one person in all the world to whom she knew how to show tenderness. Her lover-soldier, who had said good-by to her so long ago, had fallen by neither bullet nor shell. It had been a microscopic typhoid germ, in a training-camp, that had claimed him as its victim, and before he had fired a single shot, too, or won a single spur. Ever since that day when Augusta had seen wriggling before her blurred vision, half-way down in the list of deaths at the camp where the fever was working its futile havoc, the one name precious to her, the very word "typhoid" had spelled terror. But no one must guess it—not now! She had simply grunted when Reba's doctor had pronounced the dread disease—solemnly, in lowered tones downstairs in the tightly curtained parlor.

All her old traits of generalship returned to Augusta Morgan when the occasion required. She prepared herself for the combat before her with martial determination. Grim-visaged, and steady-voiced, straight of carriage, and firm of step, she moved about



the suddenly fear-ridden house, head up and unflinching. She was stubbornly optimistic. She was persistently cheerful. She met Emma's and Syringa's gloomy forebodings with a brusque unsentimentality that defied defeat.

"Oh, she'll get well all right," she'd fling out in scorn to David's furtive inquiries, and Eunice's tears. "She ain't the first who's picked up a typhoid germ in their lives, and got well of it, too!"

But the typhoid germ that Reba had picked up, probably at one of the attractive summer restaurants in or about Boston, was not mild-natured. For weeks and weeks she lay its passive victim, unconscious of the big fight that others waged for her night and day, indifferent to their tireless administrations, long night-watches, and combined efforts to spin out unbroken her frailing thread of life across the long chasm of the fever.

These efforts were successful. Reba emerged at last from the dark valley and shadow—a white thin little creature, all eyes it seemed at first to her faithful nurses—all spirit, held in a vessel so fragile that they feared it could not bear even the weight of returning strength. For after the long fever had burned itself out in Reba's body she seemed as ephemeral as the ashes of tissue paper after fire has spent its heat upon it.

As merciless as the fever was, however, with rounded chin and glowing cheek, it was not without its compensations. The transfer of Reba's torment from her mind to her body was a relief. The fever, too, proved a miraculous short-cut back into the affections of women whose hearts hadn't many avenues of



approach. But for Reba's great need of being taken care of, her aunts and Cousin Syringa would never have been given the opportunity of love-begetting service. This was especially significant with the inarticulate Augusta, clumsy and awkward in the use of every form of expression except service. There were moments during the anxious watching-time of Reba's long sickness when the tenderness in Augusta Morgan's heart amounted almost to pain. For early in the siege, Reba showed a preference for the older woman's services. Time and again she would push aside Aunt Emma's helping hand, likewise Cousin Syringa's, whispering weakly, "Not *you*—not *you*."

"It's Augusta she wants," they soon comprehended. They were right. It was the tall, taut woman with the skillful hands and masterful voice whom Reba desired. She was unaware of the actual identity of the personality that acted upon her, like a steadying portion of medicine, but she would moan and moan for Augusta Morgan for hours, as for a drug, never calling her name but restless and unsatisfied, till she came.

"Pshaw! What nonsense!" Augusta would retort to Eunice or Syringa, sent to fetch her, but she never failed to respond to the summons. She would hurry to Reba's bedside whatever the time of day or night; and when the sick girl's searching eyes rested upon her satisfied and her voice implored, "Don't leave me again, please," Augusta Morgan was obliged to clench her teeth together tight to keep her under jaw from jerking with emotion. Why, she couldn't love a child of her own more than she loved Reba, she believed. She had done all a mother could for Reba, except bear her.



It was the typhoid fever, too, that cast a shroud of mystery upon Reba, and gradually transformed her in the eyes of those whose lives contained nothing secret or concealed, into a romantic figure—enigmatical to them. For the watchers naturally enough had concluded that the name of Chadwick Booth so frequently upon Reba's lips during her delirium must be that of the husband she had mentioned the night she came home, whose ring they had had to wind with a bit of tape to keep it from slipping off her wasting finger. Therefore, when the delirium left her and the name was heard no more, they were convinced of a complexity in Reba's past that forbade questions and prosaic inquiries.

Such had been the freakish nature of Reba's delirium that not once during the run of the fever had she made a single reference to the sailor and her marriage. The indelibly imprinted details of the preceding summer excluded everything else from her brain for a while. So when, on the afternoon of the day she woke up from her illusions, she made her quiet announcement to Aunt Emma, who chanced to be on duty at the time, it created no little excitement in the camp around the green lamp-shade downstairs that evening, when it was repeated for Eunice's benefit.

Emma, in a kindly attempt to break Reba's long scrutiny of the ceiling, had shown her that afternoon a card bearing the name of Louise Bartholomew. The card, she explained to Reba's mildly interested gaze, had accompanied flowers which had long since faded. They had come soon after Aunt Augusta had written to Miss Ellsworth in answer to her inquiry, and



told her about Reba's illness. Reba made no reply to Aunt Emma's recital.

It wasn't until Aunt Emma was slipping the card back into its small envelope that the girl spoke. Then, "That isn't my name any more," she said quietly, her eyes indicating the tiny envelope, where Louise had written boldly in ink *Miss Rebecca Jerome*.

"No, I suppose not," Aunt Emma acquiesced, nervously. Reba had made no reference to her marriage since her brain had cleared.

"My name is Mrs. Nathaniel Cawthorne now," she announced.

"Mrs. what?" exclaimed Aunt Emma. "I didn't quite get it. Mrs. what, did you say?"

"Mrs. Nathaniel Cawthorne," repeated Reba distinctly, and back went her gaze to the ceiling.

Mrs. Nathaniel Cawthorne! They all repeated the unexpected name in awestruck whispers downstairs that night around Eunice's wheel-chair. Mrs. Nathaniel Cawthorne! "Who's Chadwick Booth then?" That was what Aunt Emma ought to have demanded immediately, as if without forethought. It was difficult to introduce the subject the next day.

It was more difficult still as time went on, and Reba sank deeper into mysterious silence, as she lay so quiet upon her pillow, gazing sometimes out of the window with those big eyes of hers, at the tell-tale limbs of bare elm and maple (their leaves had not even begun to turn in September); sometimes at the wide gold band upon the third finger of her left hand; sometimes, most often, at the cracks upon the ceiling—climbing their difficult ascents slowly, painstakingly, plunging down their precipitous cliffs softly,



without hurt—picking herself up and monotonously going on and on.

Reba did not fight for strength, struggle for peace of mind during the long convalescing days. Passive and inert, she lay and let nature do with her what it wanted to, looking on a little curiously at the queer workings of its ways, surprised as the days wore on that time was actually working on her its magic cure—making her body a little stronger every week (and with no help from her), her mind a little better able to face the truth without the old stab of pain.

But instead of the pain, Reba observed that there was nothing in her heart to take its place—nothing, that is, but a queer numbness. There was no desire there any more—no desire for *anybody*, for *anything*, she thought. She felt a strange indifference toward the pile of letters waiting for her perusal—one from Louise, one from Miss Ellsworth, two from Mamie, and two with a foreign stamp and a censor label on the back from Katherine Park. She felt a strange indifference, too, about getting well, or, once well, about how she should spend the hours of the long days.

When finally she was strong enough to be propped up in bed, and use pen and paper, so indifferent had she become that she was without a qualm of fear as to the consequences of the note she wrote. It was to Nathan. It was a brief note—all she had strength for.

She told him she was living at home again, and asked him, the next time he wrote, to address his letter to Mrs. Nathaniel Cawthorne, please. "For I am wearing your ring now," it said, "as I ought. It's



about time I did a few things I ought. And I am using your name. I hope you don't mind that. It seemed to me the only right thing to do, considering how we are bound by promises, and by law. My duty, whatever it may be, is the only thing that interests me much just now. I don't know when this will reach you, but I thought you ought to know, as soon as possible, what I've done." The note ended with the usual "Good-by. Rebecca." And in a postscript at the bottom, it added: "Any time you want to come back, I'm ready for you now."

Reba knew that the note would be in San Francisco within a week after it was mailed, but it well might be months before Nathan received it. The "Ellen T. Robinson" was a very uncertain sort of boat. It was always conjecture with Reba when the bark was due in any port. Nathan had always been non-committal about its sailings and arrivals, in his letters; non-committal, too, it seemed to Reba, about his life upon it, his associates and his exact duties. That the "Ellen T. Robinson" had proved a financial success Reba did know. Nathan had proudly assured her of that, and as proof had once sent her a sixty-dollar check, the first returns, he had explained, from the little pile of earnings he had invested in the boat. That had been long ago—eight or ten months after he had left Boston. Reba had returned that check, of course. Hadn't she made it clear to him that she had more money already than she knew what to do with?

Reba fell to wondering about Nathan a little, after her note to him was on its way. Desultory wondering it was. What exactly did he look like, after all? His features had grown very dim. When she tried



to recall him now it was chiefly his loose-fitting clothes she saw, and his stoop. They didn't trouble her, however. Even the thought of him sleeping in that dark hole with the greasy Portuguese didn't trouble her. Did he wear her ring still about his neck, she wondered? Queer to be married to a man like that. Queerer still not to be afraid of it any more.

It was this amazing callousness, Reba supposed, that made it possible for women whose spirits have been broken, to enter convents. Reba's marriage was *her* convent. What difference to her what particular hardships awaited her inside its walls? She wouldn't suffer from them. She was beyond suffering. She was insensible, as if she had been soaked in cocain. Why, by the time she mailed her note, she was able to march her thoughts straight up to Chadwick Booth, or Nathaniel Cawthorne, either one, and feel neither hurt nor fear.



## CHAPTER XXXI

SIX days after Aunt Augusta had dropped Reba's note into the mail-box at the foot of Chestnut Street, a clerk placed it among the C's in the general delivery compartment in the San Francisco post-office. On the same night, in the same city, not many blocks away, in an upper bedroom, where such luxuries pervaded as carefully turned-back bedclothes, the glow of a prettily shaded drop-light, and a Bokhara rug, there lay upon the table beneath the light, three envelopes, directed to Mr. James Perkins, Ridgefield, Mass. There lay also upon the table, two forearms, elbows outstretched, supporting the body of a young man, who sat leaning forward over the table, intent upon some writing.

He was a big-framed young fellow, with sandy, close-cropped hair. His bulk was what impressed one at first glance; but when he looked up an instant in search of a word or phrase, the intelligence on his face, the dreamy look in his eyes, gave one an unexpected surprise; made one wonder if the slight stoop of the broad shoulders was not due to too much leaning over books. He had the prominent brows and goodly brain space above the eyes that indicated a scholar. The choice of books in the rack stretching across the end of the table indicated a scholar too, or a scholar in the making, at any rate.

The young man was not at present, however, occupied with any of the books. He was writing on



other envelopes—larger ones than those directed to Mr. James Perkins, and these—three in all—when he had finished them, bore the following inscriptions: “Mail at first port reached after February 15th.” “Mail at first port reached after March 31st.” “Mail at first port reached after May 15th.” Into these envelopes the notes directed to Mr. James Perkins were slipped, and the young man, snapping an elastic band around all of them, placed the packet inside a breast pocket. He then pushed back his chair and got up. He crossed the room to a coat-rack, slipped into an overcoat that hung upon it, took down a soft felt hat, and went out into the hall.

Descending two flights of softly carpeted stairs, he passed, on his way to the front door, unmistakable glimpses of home at every turn—flowering plants here; a bird in a cage there; and through the glass doors of a second-floor living-room, burning logs and a stretch of books in a low case, with photographs in silver frames, on top of it.

The doors were slightly ajar, and as the young man passed them a woman’s voice called out, “Is that you, Nathan?”

“Yes,” the young man replied. “Don’t stay up for me.”

He had an expressive voice. Any one could tell that he was addressing a woman, and a woman for whom he felt tender regard.

“Will you be home late?”

“Not very,” he called back in the gently reassuring tone which an adult sometimes assumes toward a child.

He let himself out of doors, a moment later, and



shoving his hands into his overcoat pockets set out at a brisk walk in the direction of the city's docks.

A little later the three letters directed to Mr. James Perkins had left the young man's pocket, and were locked up in a stout little chest, inside the cabin of a trading-schooner, heavy with cargo. In the morning, while the letters were rising and falling with the efforts of the schooner as it dug its nose into a gale of no small proportions, the author of those letters, far away from salt sea-spray, drenched sails, and wet and slippery decks, was seated in a pretty dining-room, beside a silver coffee-pot, eating soft-boiled eggs from a frail glass cup.

After Nathaniel Cawthorne had left his packet of letters in the little cabin of the schooner, the night before, he had returned directly to the house where the woman had spoken to him as he went out. He had let himself in with a key from his own pocket, called up the stairs cheerily, "Everybody in?" and upon receiving an answer in the affirmative, had turned off the electric light, and slipped the night-bolt across the door.

The woman was waiting for him when he reached the second floor. He could see her through the glass doors as he climbed the stairs. She was seated in a gaily covered, winged arm-chair in front of the open fire.

"Come in, Nathan," she called to him.

He obeyed.

It was a pretty room he entered, typically a woman's, with a couch in one corner piled high with lingerie pillows. There were several rocking-chairs, and the cretonne hangings at the windows were in soft shades



of lavender, pink, and light blue. The woman herself was a beruffled little creature, in appearance not unlike the angora kitten, which, head cocked on one side, sat on top of the lady's chair-back, eyes black and alert, in the late evening lamp-light. The kitten was pure white. So was the head of the little lady just below.

"Well, Nathan," she said, her eyes as dark and bright as the kitten's, as she glanced up at the young man, who drew up a chair close beside her and sat down, first laying overcoat and hat aside, "How did it go? And which was it to-night, Latin, French, or your precious modern poetry?"

"Didn't I tell you?" inquired the young man. "Professor Heckelman is away for three days, so I'm having a vacation. I went out simply for exercise to-night."

He sat in characteristic attitude, as he spoke, one hand—his left—pushed into a trousers pocket, the other lying upon a crossed knee. He raised the hand upon the knee, wriggled one of its big fingers in front of the kitten's nose. The kitten surveyed it appreciatively with crescendoing purr.

"I wish your precious Professor Heckelman would stay away for a while," scolded the little lady. "You need a vacation. Both you and Robert do—the way you two work! I must say, Ruffles here," she reached up a hand and drew the kitten down into her lap, "and I are the only frivolous creatures in this house, aren't we, Fluffs? Robert's been locked up since eight o'clock in his study writing on that Lenten series of sermons of his, I suppose, and *you*," she shook her head disapprovingly at the young man, "you, too, al-



ways with your nose in a book! Why, Nathan, you'll get to know too much for her if you don't look out!" roguishly she added.

Nathan reddened at that. He always reddened at the slightest reference to the curious circumstance that had knitted his life so closely into this white-haired little lady's and her son's. He never directly introduced the circumstance himself.

"Pass me my work-bag, Nathan, please," the little white-haired lady abruptly switched off. "Thank you." She opened it and proceeded to lay upon the table beside her some socks done up in balls. "Six pairs of old ones for you—all mended," she announced. "And six new ones, worked with your initial. Dark grays and dull greens, like the ones I always get for Robert. And this tie, to match the green ones."

The young man took the proffered tie. "It's very pretty," he said in confusion. "Mrs. Barton," he murmured, "when I think of you sewing for me like this, keeping me in shape—buying me things just as if—as if——" He stopped.

"Say it, Nathan," burst out the woman impatiently. "Say it, child, or *I* will, for you. 'Just as if I were your own mother.' There!! My dear boy," the little lady's voice became suddenly grave. She put her hand on Nathaniel Cawthorne's arm. "Haven't I told you a dozen times that I *feel* like your own mother? Haven't I told you a dozen times that your coming into our lives just when you did, just when I found myself very lonely way out here in this big strange city, so far away from all my old friends, was a god-send to me?" She stopped a second. And in a still



graver tone, added: "Robert's little brother, who didn't live very long, was just your age, Nathan. Having you like this," she pressed his arm, "has been a little like having him come back to me, to be busy over, and look out for."

"But Mrs. Barton," objected Nathaniel, careful not to move the arm where her hand still pressed, "Robert's little brother wouldn't have been uneducated, nor the rough sort of specimen I was when Robert took me in hand."

"And he wouldn't have been able, either," crisply Mrs. Barton retorted, "to give back to Robert his health again, the way you did on that 'Ellen T. Robinson' of yours, when *you* took *Robert* in hand. Oh—oh, come, don't let's get started matching obligations," she said playfully. "It's just a joy to me to have you living with us, and you know it is. And it's been a joy to Robert too to work and study with you. I sometimes think that Robert's creative ability has had more of an opportunity with you than with the church. Why, that first winter, when Robert wrote me that you had decided to let your boat go on without you, and that he was going to stay on here in San Francisco for a few months and see you get started on your new quest, I could just *feel* his interest and enthusiasm."

"It's been a fine quest, too," commented Nathan reflectively, his eyes upon the glowing ashes in the fireplace. "Quest," he repeated. "I like that word—search after something we haven't got, and want very much. It's what makes life a splendid experience, I think. Effort—endeavor," contemplatively his voice trailed off.



"Robert would make a sermon out of that, I suppose," sighed Mrs. Barton. "Robert says you're always giving him ideas for sermons. And Professor Heckelman says that you're always giving that genius brother of his, ideas for poems. He says that some of these daily exercise themes he has you write are little gems of unrhymed poetry themselves—full of wind and sails, and the foamy salt sea sometimes, and sometimes full of woods and damp moss, and animals, and things. I just wonder what you're going to be one of these days, Nathan," she exclaimed brightly.

"Well," Nathan replied with a slow smile, "it doesn't look as if I were going to be very much of a money-king, anyhow, with hardly enough income from the 'Ellen T.' to clothe myself on, and pay Professor Heckelman with."

"The young lady at home won't care, Nathan, whether you're a money-king or not, from the looks of the expensive dress she was able to buy to be married in," boldly Mrs. Barton flung out.

What if it did make him flush. ("It's just silly the way he won't ever talk about her or let anybody else," she had told the kitten earlier in the evening.)

Nathan shifted his legs uneasily at Mrs. Barton's reference, and remained silent.

"Oh, Nathan, Nathan!" she burst out at him stormily, after a minute. "Why won't you ever talk about her to me? Why won't you *ever* tell me *who* and *what* she is, and *how* you met, and *where*? I declare you act as if you were ashamed of her sometimes, and she so sweet and pretty, too!"

"You know it couldn't be ashamed of her I am, Mrs. Barton," he murmured miserably.



How could he tell this lady that his knowledge of Rebecca was almost as meager as hers? How could he expose facts, lay bare discrepancies that would make her respect his marriage less? The irregularity of his meeting with Rebecca, his stealthy courtship, the straw-wedding that had followed so abruptly, were all thorns in the sensitive Nathaniel Cawthorne's side, that pricked deeper and deeper, as he became more familiar with the illuminating ways and manners, social laws and customs of the world of Mrs. Barton and her son.



## CHAPTER XXXII

THE mother and son did share with Nathan, however, the deception he was playing upon the vague creature in the gray and lavender waiting for him back there in the east; and the device by which his letters to her should bear the postmark of foreign ports which the "Ellen T. Robinson" might likely enough visit in her wanderings. It had, in fact, been Robert Barton himself who had first put the idea into the sailor's head of remaining in San Francisco, and making of himself a fit companion for the fine young lady who had married him.

Robert Barton, during those first long days, when he lay upon the deck of the "Ellen T. Robinson," and read outloud for hours with Nathan, and talked with him for hours afterward, discovered under the crude exterior an appreciation of beauty of words, a fineness, a delicacy of feeling, that had something of the spark of divine fire in it. Robert Barton had left Boston tired, and bored, and ambitionless. He had arrived in San Francisco, refreshed, and interested, and possessed of an eager desire to see what he could make of the big sailor-boy.

The clergyman had friends in San Francisco, and an uncle and aunt were expecting him to spend some months with them. But he preferred to live closer to his new interest. He and Nathan roomed at the same place during their first months in San Francisco, ate at the same restaurants, went to many of the same



places of amusement, many of the same places of improvement, and tramped together miles upon miles many of the same sidewalks in earnest conversation. It was Robert Barton who first told the sailor-boy how to hold a fork, how to use a napkin, how to approach a table in a restaurant, what to look for upon the menu, what to eat. It was Robert Barton who first outfitted him in proper civilian clothes. It was the clergyman, too, who started him into the night schools, and when his small roll of money had been exhausted and before the "Ellen T. Robinson" had returned him anything in the way of funds, saved his new young friend from feeling himself an object of charity by giving him manuscripts to copy on the typewriter—old sermons he wanted preserved and properly filed.

Later it was Robert Barton who discovered the invaluable Professor Heckelman. This was not, however, until after the clergyman had undertaken his duties in his new post in the San Francisco church, which had discovered the young Bostonian before he had been many months in the city. Robert Barton's mother had joined her son, as soon as possible after he had decided to accept the post, and it was she who then proceeded to take Nathan "under her wing," as she put it.

Robert Barton had been in doubt as to just how his mother would feel in regard to his curious young secretary, as he liked to call Nathan, who was fast becoming a valuable help to him.

"He's still pretty unused to high collars, and drawing-rooms, Mother. But he's useful to me in a hundred ways, and he needs most just now what a home



could give him. How would it do to ask him to visit us for a fortnight, after we get settled?"

At the end of the first week of that fortnight, Mrs. Barton said to her son, "He's got to stay, Robert. I want him. I've taken a liking to him."

Robert Barton was not surprised. Nathan was the kind of man whom people did take a liking to. Big, slow-moving, he was like a Newfoundland dog in some ways, instinctively gentle toward soft and small creatures, and to everybody steady and confidence-inspiring.

Nathan's reticence about the pretty girl whom Mrs. Barton had seen him marry with her own eyes, and sent him off with in her own limousine afterward, was the only thing about him that did not please her. He was talkative enough about his early life—his mother, for instance, that horrible brute of a step-father, and his travels; but mention the little brown-eyed creature in the Boulangeat gown, and he became as dumb as the sphinx. It was odd, when he seemed so devoted. Well, Mrs. Barton would help him all she could, even if he wouldn't confide in her. She would surround him with the refining influences of home, as she knew so well how to do. It was in Mrs. Barton's well-appointed dining-room that Nathan first ate oranges with a pointed spoon, and drank black coffee from tiny cups with little handles; in her living-room that he learned to stand up (as Robert occasionally did) when his mother entered a room; to anticipate her wishes (as Robert seldom did) about shades to be lowered, windows to be raised, doors closed, or chairs moved.

On the February night that Nathan sat in Mrs. Barton's sitting-room before her fire, he was still



a little awkward in his motions; but that was part of his fascination, Mrs. Barton thought. So thought certain of the young ladies in Robert's parish.

"Just exactly who is that great nice awkward Mr. Cawthorne of yours, Mr. Barton?" one day one of them asked Robert. "He helped us all day yesterday at the church, getting the scenery ready for our Guild play, and half of us have lost our hearts to him."

To-night Mrs. Barton was a little more impatient than usual with Nathan's silence; and in a fresh effort to break through it (the hour, the purring cat, the glowing ashes, were all conducive to confidences) she asked:

"Have you heard from the east lately, Nathan?"

He knew what she meant. He had not heard since last July. But Mrs. Barton must not know. She had once told him that she used to write to her husband every single day whenever they were separated.

"I haven't heard so very lately," he replied as lightly as he could. "But it isn't as if she thinks I'm here to get her letters when they're fresh, you know."

"I hope," Mrs. Barton went on, "they're nice letters when they *do* come."

"Oh, they are—they are," he murmured loyally; but as he spoke, the vision of Rebecca's brief little notes, and his studiously brief replies to match them flashed before him.

"Don't you think," pursued the persistent little Mrs. Barton, "you ought to tell her pretty soon what you've been up to since you saw her last?"

Nathan wanted to reply, "I'm beginning to think she doesn't care what I've been up to," but instead he said quietly, "I don't see that there is any hurry." He



couldn't tell Rebecca that he had made himself more fit for her, without seeming to suggest his return, and she must be the one to suggest that.

"It doesn't seem a bit fair to her, to let her go on thinking of you as so different, Nathan dear, from what you really are."

Nathan smiled.

"Was I pretty awful?"

"Not *really*—just the outside. You were just the same pure gold underneath, only—oh, Nathan, *do* let her know about you. Please write and tell her, and then let me ask her to come out here for a little visit, as I've wanted to so long."

Nathan shook his head.

"You're good to me, Mrs. Barton, but no," he said. "You see, my four years aren't up till June. Besides, I'm planning to take those college examinations first. No, I'd rather wait until next summer, if you please, Mrs. Barton."

Mrs. Barton shrugged. "Do as you please. Do as you please. But if I were in your place, Nathan, I wouldn't put a thing off until next summer that I could do *now*. No, sir, I wouldn't—with all this talk about the United States going into the war."

Nathan was glad of any excuse to change the subject. He laughed with relief.

"And I, just the proper fighting age, too!" he said lightly.

"Oh, don't laugh, Nathan," the little white lady shuddered. "It's too real, and too near to laugh about. It may enter *our* lives before we know it, and muddle things all up for *us*, the way it has for the people on the other side—for me, and for Robert, and for *you*,



Nathan, and your little gray-and-lavender lady too! You never can tell."

Nathan replied, "It may straighten things out for some of us, Mrs. Barton."

"It may straighten things out for me and the little gray-and-lavender lady." That was what Nathaniel Cawthorne was thinking. That was what he said out-loud to himself, a half-hour later, upstairs in his bedroom, where he stood gazing down at the plain gold wedding-ring, strung onto a long black ribbon, lying in the palm of his hand. He had to look at this wedding-ring ever so often, to assure himself that it really did exist. He had to summon before his vision, every little while, the bright image of Rebecca in her wedding-dress, sitting beside him in the wine-colored lined limousine, telling him in earnest tones that she wasn't the least bit sorry in the world that she had married him, to persuade himself that the author of the cool blue notes had actually been pronounced his wife.

They were unconvincing little notes. They left him hungry and disappointed. They aroused vague doubts in his breast. The only way he could quiet those doubts was by rehearsing over and over again every detail of the meetings with Rebecca that might go to prove that she had cared for him, concluding always with that last kiss in the railroad station.

He had not urged that kiss. She had given it to him of her own free will. What if her notes were brief and far-between? What if she had rebuffed his overbold expressions of affection, recoiled from his freedom in addressing her as his wife, in signing himself her husband? He must remember that she had



kissed him once! Woman were not like men. They were shy, easily frightened creatures. They had to be persuaded, and gently led—especially a woman of Rebecca's type. She was like a lily. It had been foolish of him to attempt to burn a fire in the chalice of a lily!

Thus for a while the sailor made excuse for Reba's notes. He must be patient, he told himself, bide his time, have faith; and for a while he *was* patient, *did* bide his time, *did* have faith. But he possessed too keen an intuition not to be aware of the change in Rebecca's letters.

Of late, he had fallen into the way of re-reading a few of the letters she wrote just after their marriage and comparing them with a few of the last that she had written. The contrast was significant. In the early letters there had been something—some little reference, some little expression of kindly feeling toward him, to pin his faith on; but in the last one there was nothing he could pin anything on but doubts and misgivings. She never referred by any chance to their marriage in her later letters. She had jumped with eagerness at his suggestion that he postpone his return for a year. He hadn't meant to postpone it *really*. But evidently she didn't want him to come back. And now this disturbing silence! Oh, he *didn't* want to lose the sweetness out of his quest.

Every probe and inquiry from the innocent Mrs. Barton, which made clearer Rebecca's neglect of him, hurt Nathan. He wanted to close his eyes—his brain, too—to every evidence that might clinch the fast-growing conclusion that Rebecca wished to evade her marriage vows. So long as she had written *some-*



*thing*, acknowledged his existence, by even addressing envelopes to him, there was the consolation that, while there is life, there is hope. But silence—dead silence—what could he conclude?

Yesterday, when the clerk behind the general delivery window in the post-office had, as usual, replied curtly, "Nothing," to his inquiry, he had made a vow to wait a month or six weeks before subjecting himself to the sure slap of that "nothing" again. In a month the first of the three letters he had written to Rebecca ought to reach her. In six weeks, or anyway eight, he ought to receive her reply to it, if indeed she did reply, and he thought she would.

He had been very guarded in his reference to her silence in that letter, but he had mentioned it. He couldn't go on forever accepting it without explanation. All he had said was that he had received no message from her the last two times his boat had touched San Francisco.

"Perhaps you have been busy. A young lady in a position such as you are filling hasn't much time for letter-writing, I know, and I shouldn't even want you to write to me, unless you really wanted to. I shouldn't want it to become a duty. Please let me know if keeping up with me has become a little of a duty. For a wandering sailor, such as I am, can easily drop out of a girl's life."

When Mrs. Barton had mentioned the war downstairs, it had flashed across Nathan's mind for the first time as a possibility for him. The war would be an excellent way of dropping out of Rebecca's life. It would be an excellent excuse, too, to offer to the insatiable Mrs. Barton for not joining Rebecca the



following summer. War! How he would hate it—fighting—roughness. He had had so much of it in his life. He smiled bitterly, as he contemplated the remote possibility, gazing down at the ring in his hand.

“Suppose *I should* go over to France—just suppose,” he said, toying with the idea, “and suppose I never came back! Muddle things up for Rebecca? I don’t think so.”

He clasped his hand over the wedding-ring, clenched it tight. Oh, had she forgotten completely those dark hours in the theater?



## CHAPTER XXXIII

NATHAN was on his way to Professor Heckelman's rooms when he stopped at the general delivery window to inquire for mail, some four weeks later. He put the letter that the clerk passed to him hastily into his coat-pocket, and five minutes afterward read it by the light of an illuminated drugstore window.

Professor Heckelman waited in vain for Nathan that night, and Mrs. Barton waited until after twelve o'clock.

Nathan hardly knew what streets he tramped as he grappled with the staggering revelations in that letter of Rebecca's. What did she say? "Address her next time as Mrs. Nathaniel Cawthorne?" "Wearing his ring?" "Using his name?" Those opening sentences had elated Nathan at first. She wasn't then evading her marriage vows! He hadn't then labored in vain to make his name more worthy to be borne by her! A wave of joy had flooded over him. Reading on, however, that wave receded gradually, drew away from him, left him cold and shivering finally. "Doing what she ought to do!" "Seemed the only right thing!" "Bound by law!" "Her duty!" Oh, all that recalled so vividly to Nathaniel Cawthorne the martyr-like attitude of the brave woman up there in the tarpaper covered shack on the edge of the Maine woods that he shuddered at the similarity. It was his mother's submissive eyes that Nathan saw when he read



Rebecca's postscript. "I'm ready for you, when you are ready to come."

"Thank heaven," he whispered, "I'm not the son of that brute who made my mother suffer."

He felt no bitterness toward Rebecca. His mother had left an indelible impression upon him, and the pitying protection he used to feel for her so strongly he now felt for Rebecca. Somehow he must protect Rebecca from all fear of himself. For she was afraid of him! It was clear enough now. She had probably been afraid of him ever since that first letter, which he had written her on the boat. Poor tormented girl! He understood now why her notes to him had been brief and impersonal. They had not cloaked an inarticulate love, as he had dimly hoped, but instead a fear, a dread, perhaps an actual aversion. Often he had seen his mother's high sense of duty triumph like this over fear and aversion. But he wanted nothing of that sort from Rebecca. No! No!

"Oh, I'll never come. You needn't be afraid. I'll never come back, Rebecca," he whispered, as if she were there beside him to hear.

A few days later a young ambulance-driver, just returned from France, chanced to dine at the Barton's. The young fellow's description of his experiences behind the firing-line was filled with flying shells and bursting bombs. He had brought back some relics and passed them round after dinner. As Nathan examined the heavy lump of jagged-edged shrapnel which Mrs. Barton, with a little shudder dropped into his palm as if glad to be rid of it, he wondered, turning the thing slowly over and over in his hand, if a bit of that stuff, sudden and quick in the head some-



where, wouldn't be preferable to drifting about interminably at sea.

One day in mid-April, seated at dinner in the Barton dining-room, Mrs. Barton as usual at the head of the table, and Robert as usual at the foot, Nathan made his quiet announcement. It was a complete surprise to the mother and son.

"I'm going away for a little while," he said.

"Going away?" Robert inquired. It hadn't been mentioned before.

"Yes," he went on, glancing down at the saltcellar, and keeping his eyes upon it. "Sailors have kind of wandering natures, you know. I've been thinking for some time I better be moving on to the next port."

"What port, Nathan?" asked the clergyman.

"Well, you see, the fact is," Nathan stumbled, "it's like this. Things get to rankling in your mind, you know how, and this war, ever since the United States decided to get into it—well, it's been sort of rankling in my mind. Perhaps I better wake up, and take a little part in things. Man of my age can't be putting energy into educating himself too finely, without some pretty good excuse, these times, seems to me."

"What do you mean? What foolish notion have you gone and got now?" demanded Mrs. Barton, with sudden energy.

"Well," Nathan shrugged, "I might as well get into it first as last."

"Are you going to enlist, Nathan?" Robert asked gravely.

Nathan was embarrassed. War had been declared only a fortnight. He didn't want to appear impulsive.



"Well," he acknowledged diffidently, "I was thinking of it a little."

Mrs. Barton suddenly flung down her fork onto her plate.

"Oh," she burst out, "I just knew this horrid war was going to hit *me*. I've felt it from the start. Robert, are *you* going to go and enlist too?" she demanded with alarm.

Robert smiled indulgently at the little firebrand opposite him, then turned to Nathan.

"Nathan," he said, "your decision, if it actually is a decision, is a surprise to me. Of course I knew you'd be ready to do your part when the time came. But I should have supposed we would have talked over a thing of this sort."

"Perhaps I ought to have," Nathan replied. "I mean still to talk over the details with you. But the question of my getting into the scrap, *somehow, somewhere*—well, I couldn't see any reason for talking it over. I couldn't see any argument against it, not having any one dependent on me, you know, and——"

"You're married!" flashed Mrs. Barton with heat.

"Yes, that's so," acknowledged Nathan; "but she is rather used not to having me about. And," he added, managing to smile a little, "I was thinking a uniform would add a little to my appearance, perhaps."

Strange he could keep on building air-castles on his dead hopes.

"Uniform! I wouldn't give a cent for fifty uniforms!" exclaimed Mrs. Barton. "It's a burning shame to keep that girl waiting for a uniform—after all this time! If that's your reason for enlisting, I don't think much of it!"



"Were you thinking of sea or land service, Nathan?" inquired the clergyman quietly.

"Land, I guess. Seems strange to you, I suppose. Seaman, like me. But I might as well get into the thick of it. Besides, I've had a pretty big dose of the sea."

"When, Nathan?" queried Robert Barton.

"Oh, as soon as possible. Next week—the week after!"

"Why, Nathaniel Cawthorne," ejaculated Mrs. Barton. "What about passing those examinations at the university, Professor Heckelman has gone to such trouble to make arrangements for? Two months ago you were studying yourself just pale, in an effort to get that bit of paper that would certify to Rebecca how much progress you'd made, and now you mean to say you aren't going to stay even for the examinations! Well, I call that foolish!"

"Probably, it does seem so, Mrs. Barton, but I don't seem to have the same heart for books lately," truthfully Nathan told her.

"Nonsense! Mercy, what if all our young men went and lost their heads like this? Anyhow, Nathan," she brought out triumphantly, "they won't have you, dear child, with those fingers of yours!"

"See if they won't!" Nathan retorted. "Except for the looks, I don't miss those fingers any more than I do long hair, Mrs. Barton."

Robert Barton told his mother that night, after Nathan had gone to his room, that he thought he understood the reason for the boy's decision.

"It is the result of the general waking-up in him. He's never felt any personal responsibility toward any-



thing before—least of all toward a big affair like the U. S. A. Education has created in him a new feeling of respectability, a new feeling of responsibility too, which he can't quite dodge. I saw that he was interested when Jenkins, the young ambulance-driver, was here, but I had no idea it was as serious as this. I must write to Richard Macomber—classmate of mine. Lives in New York. He's interested in things military. Spent two summers at Plattsburg. He'll know how to advise Nathan wisely."

"O dear, dear, how I shall miss that boy!" sighed Mrs. Barton, wiping teary eyes. "Next to you, Robert, he's the dearest boy in the world to me."

The day before Nathan started for the east (after Richard Macomber had replied to Robert Barton that he'd like to see his friend's protégé, and talk with him) he left a package in a jeweler's shop with instructions for it to be mailed on a certain date the following July. The package was for Rebecca. It was an answer to her letter.

Nathan figured that of the notes he had left on the schooner to be mailed to Rebecca at different ports the last one ought surely to reach her by June. However, he'd play safe, and wait until July before mailing a reply to her letter. He wished to avoid all danger of detection. He didn't want Rebecca to surmise that he had been working a deception upon her all these years. She must never guess how hard he had tried to make himself suitable for her. He didn't want pity any more than he wanted submission.

More than a year ago Nathan had bought an engagement ring for Rebecca. He had observed that in Mrs. Barton's world most all the young married



women wore engagement-rings with their wedding-rings, and he had asked Mrs. Barton to help him pick one out. He had drawn twenty-five dollars from his savings-bank account, to pay for the ring. The stone in it wasn't very large, but it was larger than twenty-five dollars ever could have bought. In the midst of the purchase of the ring Mrs. Barton had asked Nathan please to call up the house by telephone, and tell them that she'd be a little late for lunch. In his absence she and the clerk had changed the price tags.

Mrs. Barton supposed that Rebecca had long been wearing the pretty little ring which it had so rejoiced her heart to pay for in part. But Rebecca had never seen it. It had been lying quietly all this time in the top drawer of Nathan's chiffonier.

He hadn't meant to keep it so long, but he couldn't mail it immediately because he was supposed to be in New Zealand at the time, or some such remote place, and when he might have sent it without suspicion, he had begun to be afraid that any reminder of his claims might be unwelcome to the girl who had jumped so eagerly at his suggestion that he postpone his return.

He pondered over what to do with the little useless symbol as he made preparations to move his belongings out of the room that had been his so long. For so many months he had been accustomed to take out the dainty little platinum circlet, with the single pure white stone, and gaze upon it, as his thoughts hovered tenderly about Rebecca, that now the sight of it was painful to him. The little velvet-lined jewel-box that held the precious crystal so like Rebecca herself, had become a little velvet-lined casket that held something



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dead now, and soulless. He wanted to bury it out of his sight.

One night as he lay awake, staring into the dark, it occurred to him that the ring might perform a service for him. He had been wondering in what words he could most sparingly offer Rebecca her release. The ring could help him, he believed. He got up, and then and there sat down at his desk, and wrote a note to Rebecca.

This is what it said:

DEAR REBECCA:

I am sending you an engagement ring because you never had one. Most girls are engaged before they are married, but it's the other way round with you. I am asking you to be engaged after you are married. And just as most girls' engagements are followed by marriage, yours, Rebecca, is to be followed by friendship. The fortunes of a sailor are uncertain always, but especially in time of war. I have been thinking of getting into the war myself, and before doing it, it seems only fair to relieve you of all further obligations to me. It isn't right that you should be troubled all your life by the thought of your duty to such a stranger as I am to you. This ring I am sending wipes out our marriage, Rebecca.

I am proud you are using my name, but if you see fit not to use it in the future, it will be all right. The thought that you used it even for a little while will help me always to keep it clean.

I'm sorry, but it won't be very convenient for me ever to see you again—so don't be afraid I'll be turning up some day. I won't. I think, Rebecca, there is something about "on the grounds of desertion" that makes things easy for a girl, left by a man as I am leaving you.

Good-by, Rebecca, and this time, forever.

NATHAN.



## CHAPTER XXXIV

**T**HE Ridgefield town-hall was an ugly building. Its narrow dimension faced the street, and the front door, cut in the middle a good twelve feet above the sidewalk, was approached by two curving flights of steps, meeting at the top, and forming a half-circle. Over these steps there traveled daily now, morning and afternoon, and evening too sometimes, the feet of at least half of the women of Ridgefield.

It was half-past five in the afternoon now, and for the past hour the steps had recorded only departures. In Ridgefield supper was at six o'clock, and in very few of the kitchens were there servants to prepare the evening meal.

There was only one woman left in the town-hall assembly-room at this hour. She looked very small in the big empty space, standing alone behind the long white oil-cloth-covered table, extending in front of the platform. Piles of compresses, dressings, and rolls of bandages surrounded her. She was inspecting them evidently, reaching forward now, drawing a pile of them toward her, next leaning close above it a moment, her body straightening itself afterward, her arm flashing to left or right as she accepted or discarded.

This woman was always the last one to leave the assembly-hall at night before the janitor appeared with broom, long-handled brushes, dustpan and huge scrap-basket. She was always the first one to appear at



the hall in the morning. Some one had to prepare the room for the workers, who, children sent off to school, breakfast dishes washed, beds made, and to-day's sweeping crammed in with to-morrow's baking, began to troop in about ten o'clock.

There had been seventeen men drafted from Ridgefield in the first call. There had been over twice that number who had volunteered. The fifty-three Ridgefield boys with the colors had been like hot burning coals beneath a melting-pot to their home-town. There had been a welding together of sympathies in Ridgefield such as had not been known there since '62. The son of Mr. Horween, who sat at a mahogany desk in the luxurious general manager's office of the Ridgefield Wire Company, was a tentmate of the son of Hans Bergstrom, who ran a lathe in the same concern; and Mrs. Horween and Mrs. Bergstrom sat many a morning side by side in the Ridgefield town-hall, folding gauze, rolling bandages, and comparing knitting stitches. The local orators in their speeches referred to the Ridgefield men in their country's service as "Our boys." How it made one thrill—fight to keep the tears back—"Our boys!" Rich or poor, native or foreign-born, conscript or volunteer, private or officer, commissioned or non-commissioned, each and every one of them—*ours*—to hope for, to pray for, to work for, to be proud of; the life of each mother's son of them of equal value, the sympathy for each son's mother of them left behind to wait and watch of equal tenderness and depth.

The same women, who but a few months before had sat in their own front-rooms, in their own rocking-chairs, embroidering their own center-pieces, glancing



slyly out from behind their curtains now and then, at occasional passing neighbors, and making little cattish criticisms of them, found themselves instead spending hours under the same roof with those neighbors, working with them on the same set of pajamas, the same pair of slippers, the same comfort-bag, and, (miraculous result of the Kaiser's ambitions) actually sharing such intimacies as what they ate for breakfast, how much flour, sugar or butter they used a week, and exchanging recipes for wheatless biscuits, butter-less cake, and meat substitutes.

Even Augusta Morgan went to sew one morning a week in the town-hall. She sat apart a little haughtily at first. But as time went on she unbent gradually. There was more ability among the Ridgefield women than you'd imagine, she told Eunice after her third morning in the town-hall. That slack-appearing Mrs. Smith was really quite nice when you got to know her, and that girl whom Silas Brown had up and married ten years ago wasn't half as scatter-brained as she looked. For the few women whose sons or brothers, husbands—or perhaps lovers—were actually wearing the olive-drab, Augusta Morgan felt a sympathy so keen that she was afraid it would be noticed. The memory of her soldier-boy, so long gone now, made her throat ache when she regarded these other women hoping as she had once hoped, trying to be brave and of good cheer, as she had once tried to be brave and of good cheer.

Upon this particular midsummer afternoon the young lady left alone in the town-hall, after placing the stacks of bandages and piles of dressing in various labeled boxes, opened a small door under the



platform and slipped them out of sight. She then approached a flat-topped desk, facing the door, and sitting down before it began writing in a large book—records of some sort. She wrote with a fountain-pen, that made a pleasant purring sound as it traveled smoothly over the page.

The pen's purring was interrupted ten minutes later. Somebody had pushed open one of the big doors.

The young lady glanced up, without any great curiosity. But at sight of the figure she saw standing on the threshold before her a faint color mounted to her face.

"Cousin Pattie!" she exclaimed.

"Hello, Reba," the large fleshy woman upon the threshold replied with a broad pleased smile.

Reba got up, walked across the hall, extended her hands, both of them.

Cousin Pattie grasped them, and kissed Reba.

"Why, Cousin Pattie," Reba exclaimed again. "Where—I thought—— Do sit down. Why, I'm so surprised!"

There were chairs near at hand. Cousin Pattie sat down in the nearest one, in front of one of the work-tables. Reba sat down opposite her.

"Where did you drop from, Cousin Pattie?"

"From up the hill. Been waiting for you for an hour and a half, up at the house. They told me I'd most likely find you here."

"But we thought you were in Europe. We heard you went to England after your San Domingo trip. We had no idea——"

"Nobody has any idea about Cousin Pattie, child," the older woman interrupted, chuckling. "Haven't



you learned that yet? Can't keep her bottled up in Europe, if she takes a notion not to be bottled, submarine or no submarine warfare. My! Reba," she broke off, abruptly, "you've grown good-looking! Typhoid must agree with you." She reached a fat hand across the table and laid it intimately on Reba's arm. "Tell me, child; how are you?"

"Oh, I'm well," said Reba.

"Running the whole shebang up here, so Hattie Miles down in Union tells me."

"They had to have somebody do it," Reba belittled, "and *I* had to have something to do, so——"

"Did you? Didn't feel that way last time I was here, if I recollect. Folded hands was your duty then. Seems to me that scarab of mine has worked pretty well on you, Reba, from all I hear."

"Why, I'm back again, just where you left me, Cousin Pattie."

"Same *place*, perhaps. That proves nothing. I know, and you do, too, that once a chicken breaks his shell, however hard he finds the picking, he can't ever go back and be a satisfied yellow yolk again. And I'll wager you don't want to be either, Reba. You may have gotten a broken wing and a broken heart too, for all *I* know. But what of that? 'Tisn't fatal, like growing stale inside a shell. I guess you'd rather hobble around with no wings than go back into the dark, prenatal state I found you in four years ago. There's a look about you to-day, Reba, that makes me feel pretty sure you've uttered *your* first cry all right. You're married, they say," Cousin Pattie broke off, reaching across the table again and tapping the gold



ring on Reba's left hand, lying in front of her, as she leaned forward, supported by her elbows.

"Yes, I'm married, Cousin Pattie."

"Hattie Miles told me. Seafaring man. What's he like, Reba? Tell me. They were awfully close-mouthed about him up at the house, just now. You know what Augusta is—I couldn't get any satisfaction."

"They don't know much about Nathan up at the house," Reba answered. "I don't know very much about him myself. My marriage," she added, "was sort of a leap in the dark."

"Oh! I see—leap in the dark, was it? Sudden affair! And you haven't struck bottom yet, eh?"

"Not the bottom of my marriage. But I've struck some bottoms," said Reba.

Cousin Pattie let the words sink in a moment. Then, "Well—what if you have?" she snapped back. "Pick yourself up and go along! 'In spite of'—'in spite of'—you know."

Reba shook her head.

"I don't know that I think much of that motto of yours, Cousin Pattie."

"That so?" surprised, the challenged woman queried.

"Not to pass around to everybody. It's dangerous. It's so likely to back-fire."

Cousin Pattie surveyed her with deepening interest. A new Reba indeed who conversed in similes, and looked enigmatical!

"What did my motto do to you, Reba?"

"It wasn't your fault, Cousin Pattie," Reba replied. "You gave me the instructions how to use it. I ignored them, that was the trouble. You told me that just so



an ambition was self-respecting and didn't hurt anybody else, it was all right to go after it, and to go after it hard. I kept before me the last part of your advice, but forgot the first. And the first is the important part. But you aren't to blame if I got hurt. It was nobody's fault but my own!"

"So you did get hurt!"

"Oh, a little," Reba shrugged.

"And you're staying here till the hurt goes? Is that it?"

"No, that isn't it," Reba denied. "I'm staying here simply till Nathan, my husband, you know, comes back from the South Seas where his business takes him. There is no hurt," she added, "in an arm or a leg after it's amputated. The part of me that was hurt has been cut out."

Cousin Pattie stared at Reba. "You've grown deep, Reba," she remarked.

"Yes," Reba smiled faintly, "the pool has grown deep, Cousin Pattie."

"Been dredged?"

"Yes," again Reba agreed, "big, dripping clawfuls of stuff taken right out of the heart of it."

"So I can't see the bottom of it any more, I declare!" Cousin Pattie sighed. "Old notions, old prejudices, old time-worn rules of right and wrong dumped out, I suppose, on the bank. Discarded."

But Reba shook her head at that. "No, Cousin Pattie," she said soberly, "some of the old notions and prejudices and time-worn rules were too deep for the dredge to reach, thank heaven."

"Why 'thank heaven'?" inquired Cousin Pattie suspiciously. "There's a ring to your talk I don't



fathom. I've got to start along to my train in five or ten minutes. So talk fast, Reba. Come, tell me, what horrible thing is it you've escaped that makes you so thankful to heaven for your New England rock-bottom? This mysterious husband of yours, child?"

"Oh, no. Not Nathan," Reba assured her. "I should hope I wasn't trying to escape the man I married of my own free will."

"Oh!" the intuitive Cousin Pattie exclaimed. There was an emphasis in the girl's speech that substantiated the rumor about her, which she had heard at Hattie Miles'. "Look here," she asked bluntly in a lower tone. "Is it another man who's messed up your affairs for you, Reba?"

Reba replied steadily, "No, it isn't; but it might have been, if it wasn't for the things which the dredge couldn't reach. Cousin Pattie," she went on, "I want you to know one thing. You ought to, so when you advise other girls. I want you to know that it was the traditions of this little corner of the world, the ideals that seemed to you so choking, so suffocating, that saved me. You made them look ridiculous. And they're not—always."

"Good for you, Reba!" Cousin Pattie applauded. "Good for you! That's the way to talk. I always did say, 'give me a woman who's tested her traditions—ideals, beliefs—whatever you want to call 'em—refused to take 'em for granted, as they were passed down to her, but poured water into them herself to see if they'd hold it!' Convictions, Reba, born of experience are *grand* things—and you've got 'em! My gracious, you've got 'em, Reba!"

"Oh, no, I haven't. I haven't many convictions.



On most things I'm still groping, fumbling, waiting—waiting——”

“Naturally,” interrupted Cousin Pattie, impatiently. “What do you expect? Rome wasn't built in a day, child. Souls don't get their buildings all up, and streets all laid out spick and span in a moment. What makes *me* rejoice is, you've *got* a soul, Reba. My lands, last time I was here, I couldn't see one even in embryo. Well,” she switched off, “when do you expect this husband of yours to be showing up anyhow?”

“I don't know. I can't tell. It takes a long while for our letters to reach each other.”

“Mixed up in the war some way, is he?”

“Oh, no. I doubt if Nathan is even an American citizen. He lives at sea, you know.”

“You going to live at sea too? Little land creature like you?”

“If he wants me to. I'm going to do anything he wants me to do.”

A half-hour later Cousin Pattie was steaming noisily toward Union. Reba walked back from the station to the town-hall. She must finish her records before locking up and going home. She stopped in a drugstore first, however, and telephoned to Aunt Augusta not to keep supper waiting for her. It was when she was coming out of the drugstore that she met her father.

“Oh, there you are,” he said. “I'm hunting for you. Registered package for you from San Francisco. Thought it might be something valuable, so I've got it in my pocket here.”

“A package?” Reba questioned.



"Yes, from a jeweler."

He passed it to Reba. Its paper covering was sealed with splotches of red sealing-wax.

Alone five minutes later in the big empty town-hall, Reba broke the red seals. Inside a velvet-lined, gilt-embossed leather case, she came upon the little diamond and platinum symbol of her freedom. She didn't understand its significance at first, of course—not until she had read the note that was wrapped around the leather box. Afterward she sat for long minutes staring into space.

It was release Nathan offered her, she supposed—the release she had been so anxious for a year ago, had wanted so much that she had been ready to ask for it, plead for it, demand it, if necessary. But now, she didn't want release! She didn't want things made easy, smoothed out for her, who had erred so gravely. To be relieved of her marriage vows robbed her of her only opportunity for atonement.

A quixotic ambition had possessed Reba, as she got up weak and spent from her fever. The determination to accept without murmur the consequences of her acts, to endure unflinchingly deserved penalties, had uplifted and exalted her. She was New England born and reared, and she had found consolation in the hope that in doing her duty, and doing it well, she might find peace of mind again. Besides, she had told them at home that her husband was coming back to her some day. She had told Louise Bartholomew and Katherine Park too, in the first letters she had written them, that Nathan was coming, when his boat came. Why, he must—he simply *must* come now! She would send him a message. She would make him come!



The "Ellen T. Robinson" had probably just arrived in San Francisco. Upon re-reading Nathan's note, Reba concluded that he had not yet offered his services officially to his country. It would be in the navy, of course, that he, a sailor, would enlist. It occurred to her that if she didn't write immediately some great monster of the ocean might carry Nathan out of her reach completely. She mustn't lose even a day! Already it might be too late. Every moment was precious. She glanced at the clock.

The eight-thirty train connected with the western mail-train. Twenty-four whole hours would be saved if she could get a letter onto that. It was eight-fifteen now. She reached for a piece of paper.

DEAR NATHAN:

Your package has just come. You didn't understand that letter of mine. You didn't understand it at all. I don't want to be free of my marriage promises. I don't want to mean less to you. I want to mean more. Truly I do. Please come and give me a chance to mean more. You can enlist afterward. I won't stop you, but come first, please.

Good-by,  
REBECCA.

She read it through. It wasn't insistent enough—not half. It might not bring him, and if it didn't—if it *didn't* she could never wipe her slate clean.

She glanced up again at the clock, then bent impulsively.

"P.S.: Please come. Please come. *Please come,*" she wrote three times over, as a child with a limited vocabulary makes rows of stars and circles.



## CHAPTER XXXV

**L**ESS than two weeks later that note of Reba's, re-directed by the San Francisco mail-clerk, lay inside the warm pocket of a soldier in uniform. Now and then it left the pocket, and rustled in the breeze that swept a lake beside which the soldier was walking. He was a tall, well-built fellow. There was no stoop to his shoulders now. There was no looseness to his clothes. There was a clean-cutness, a fine chiseling about every curve and angle of him now that, as compared to his shapelessness four years ago, was like the finished statue as compared to the rough-hewn block of marble merely suggesting form. Massive he still was, but lean now and firm of muscle. Erect and square-shouldered, feet firmly planted upon the ground, there was something self-reliant, dauntless in the very way he stood. One didn't expect a tear from the eyes of such a military figure to splash down upon the letter which he held.

He had received that letter an hour and a half ago, but it had been opened only a short twenty minutes. Not until he had left far behind him the encampment and escaped all danger of interruption from his comrades had Nathaniel Cawthorne opened Rebecca's letter. He surmised from the date upon the envelope that the letter was an answer to the message he had left behind in San Francisco, to be sent her in July. He wanted to be unobserved when he read that answer, and placing the unopened envelope in his pocket



he walked away as fast as he could from the crowded little city, in the outskirts of which he had been in training for so many weeks.

Alone on a high grassy bank, above the rippling waters of the lake, squaring his shoulders a little first, in preparation for the stab which he felt sure the innocent envelope contained, he finally drew forth Reba's note. He opened it. For five long minutes he stood motionless staring down at the page before him. The only thing that stirred about him was the soft wide brim of his hat, and a corner of the note itself, as the breeze played with it. At the end of the five minutes the hand that held the note dropped to the soldier's side, and the eyes that had gazed so intently at Reba's summons sought with the same fixed attention the far-away green hills of Vermont.

But they did not see those hills. They saw only that row of *Please come's*. There were three of them, and each one had gone through Nathan like a sweet sharp caress. Each one had been like that last kiss of Rebecca's in the station—only not so shy, not so fleeting and soon over. "Please come," she had said three times over. And she had underlined the last "Please come." There was entreaty in that. Surely she would not underline her words out of pity. Oh, did she at last a little want *him*, who had always wanted *her* so much?

There was little sleep for the soldier that night, lying in his cot beneath his army blanket. He was not used to so many good things happening to him all in one week. The commission that had been awarded him after the long weeks of intensive training, and nerve-racking uncertainty, had kept him awake the



night before. A commission would add a little decoration to the name of Nathaniel Cawthorne; and to wrest that name from absolute indistinction for the sake of the girl who bore it had become a burning passion with him weeks before the commissions were awarded. On top of that triumph, to receive summons, underlined summons, from the girl herself, to come—*please* to come—well, it took hold of him right in the throat somehow.

If at first he had been in doubt about responding in person to Rebecca's summons, by dawn he had decided to go to her as soon as he could arrange a leave-of-absence. He would carry his captaincy to her himself, and lay it before her. But she wasn't to think that he expected anything in return. In spite of her letter, she wasn't to be afraid that he would take advantage of the impulse that prompted it. He would be so kind, so tender, so patient. If she cared for him, even a little—it seemed impossible, but if she did—oh, how he would court her all over again, as a girl of her class should be courted—slowly, painstakingly, as if there had been no exchange of plain gold rings, and with the possibility of failure always before him, so that he would be neither precipitous nor demanding.

The note Reba received from Nathan in answer to hers was mailed in Boston. It had no word of love in it. It was brief, almost formal. It told her that he had just arrived in the city, and that he would be very glad to meet her there somewhere and talk things over, at any time that was convenient to her during the next two or three days. If she preferred, he could come to Ridgefield, but he thought there would be less chance of interruption, perhaps, under that old horse-



chestnut tree in the public gardens than anywhere else. What did she think? A line dropped to him, care of the Y.M.C.A., Boston, Mass., would reach him all right, and whatever she decided, would be agreeable to him.

Two days later, at the appointed hour, three o'clock in the afternoon, Reba approached the bench under the horse-chestnut tree. Her face bore the tranquil expression of a martyr ready for the great ordeal. The bench, she observed as she caught a glimpse of it from afar, was occupied by a soldier. Unfortunate. Well, she was fifteen minutes early. She would walk around the block. Perhaps the soldier would be gone by the time she returned.

Reba walked three times around the block, but still the soldier remained upon the bench, or near it. He was standing beside it after her first journey; he was pacing up and down in front of it after her second (she was watching him from behind); he was seated upon it again with folded arms after her third. She decided, soldier or no soldier, she must keep her appointment with Nathan. She recalled how shy he used to be. He was probably lurking nearby, in hiding somewhere, waiting for her appearance beneath the horse-chestnut tree. There was no resemblance in the tall straight figure of the soldier to the slouchy sailor whom Reba had met there before.

As she approached the bench it was with absolutely no premonition of the nature of the experience before her. Silently she stole over the soft grass behind the bench, and as quietly and casually as possible slipped on to its extreme end, not even glancing in the soldier's direction as she seated herself. There were



empty benches enough nearby. It looked odd, she supposed, her sharing his. Immediately she opened her shopping-bag, drew out a letter—any old letter—and appeared to become engrossed.

Nathan had been expecting Reba to approach the bench by way of the little stone bridge, as on the previous occasions. He had been watching the bridge closely for the last ten minutes. The slight rustle of skirts behind him, the silent possession of the other end of his bench took him by surprise. When he glanced up and saw Rebecca sitting there, three feet away from him, head bent, eyes downcast, rummaging busily in her shopping-bag, his first emotion was one of amazement, his second of mystification. He stared at her without moving a muscle. What did she mean? What did she imply? Did she dread his greeting? Wish to postpone for a moment or two the first awkward words of recognition? Ah, he understood. She was right. Silence was best after all. The moment was too significant for words. He doubted if he could speak anyhow. The moment was too significant even for the encounter of their eyes. Was it fear of her, or doubt of her, or love of her that choked him so?

She was in gray to-day as she had been that last time. But her costume was not so gala. There were no draperies, no billows to-day. She looked like some little gray furry animal in her close tailored gown, smooth and soft and sleek. One could see the curves of her. If one dared, one could stroke her, and *feel* the curves! Yes, she was like one of the little gray captive fawns Nathan used to like to stroke when he was a boy. A neighboring farmer had caught a couple



of them once and kept them for pets. There was something white at Rebecca's throat. It fluttered in the breeze and buried her chin in snowy froth as she bent over her letter. It pressed an edge of transparent lace close against her cheek. As Nathan sat and stared at the lace he thought he saw the color of her cheek beneath it deepen.

Reba was fearfully afraid her color was deepening. She didn't want to blush just because a stranger stared at her. She could *feel* him staring, not stirring an eyelash, concentrating his whole attention upon her. Rude of him! Crude of him! she thought to herself. Wouldn't it be wiser if she corrected his erroneous impression, explained her presence, asked him if he had seen any one waiting for her here? She was on the verge of folding up her letter, preparatory to making some such speech when the soldier addressed her.

It was Nathan who spoke first. He didn't mean to. Her name came out all by itself. "Rebecca!" he exclaimed suddenly. He couldn't wait any longer. "Rebecca!" he repeated in a low voice, leaning toward her.

He wouldn't have frightened her for anything in the world, and he knew the moment she glanced up at him that he *had* frightened her. There was a startled, unprepared expression on her face. Moreover, she was evidently unable to speak. She just sat and looked at him and looked at him, as if he were the last person in the world she had expected to see seated beside her on the bench underneath the horse-chestnut tree.

He didn't realize how changed he was in her eyes. During his absence, whenever she had thought of him, it was never eyes, nose, mouth, features she saw, but



just outline. *Was* it he? *Was* it Nathan? This man? No. Yes. No.

"You don't know me!" he exclaimed.

"I don't think I do," said Reba, in a jerky dazed voice, still staring.

He took off his hat. "Now do you?" he inquired, smiling.

Her eyes swept the contour of his close-cropped head, bared forehead, sensitive temples.

"No, I don't think I do," she repeated again in the same queer little frightened voice.

She sought his eyes. They were bluish gray eyes. She had never been quite sure of their color till this moment. They always used to waver and slip away from her, but now Nathan's gaze was taut and steady like the muscles of his body.

"I don't understand," Reba murmured, and she could feel one of her knees, the left one, trembling ridiculously; "I don't understand."

Nathan tried to laugh. It wasn't very successful. She looked so troubled and perplexed, and he wanted so to lay bare his whole soul to her; tell her how hard he had worked to make himself desirable, ask her, straight out if he *was* desirable, if she wanted him; listen to the music of her "well done." He believed she was lovelier than the image of her he had been carrying about with him all these long years. He had never dared, she had never allowed him, to look straight into her eyes like that before. They were the soft, dark-brown shade of the deep secluded pools hidden away in the little winding brooks up in the woods where he used to fish for trout. They lured



him like those pools. They were full of hidden treasures. But he gave no voice to such sentiments.

"There isn't much to understand," he said. "The poor fool you married doesn't exist any more. That's all. That's what I've come to tell you, and you're as free as if he had a tombstone at his head."

She got but a vague idea of the meaning of his words. All she could hear was the new miraculous inflection.

"I don't understand," she exclaimed again in a distressed tone, as if it hurt her physically not to understand. "I don't like surprises. I don't like jokes!"

Nathan surveyed her in amazement. She was almost savage about it. The brown pools shone mahogany red.

"Jokes?" he repeated. "Jokes?"

"I don't like things I don't understand." Her voice was beginning to tremble now, like that absurd left knee. "I don't like them, I don't like them," she said twice over.

The truth was she was afraid if she didn't keep on saying something, making her lips form words, that her teeth would begin to chatter, like the time when the little boy was run over by an automobile once before her very eyes, and picked up afterward limp and apparently lifeless. It was the shock, she supposed. She had come ready, steeled for the uncouth sailor, and instead a fine stranger in uniform—an officer, she believed, (didn't two bars mean a captain?)—spoke with Nathan's voice, smiled with Nathan's smile, but wasn't like Nathan at all. She took out a handkerchief from her bag, and pressed it up against her lips hard, holding her teeth steady.



"I didn't mean to frighten you," she heard the officer saying to her, solicitously. "I'm sorry. It isn't a joke. I didn't mean to frighten you."

"I'm *not* frightened," she managed to murmur through her tightly closed teeth. They mustn't chatter!

"I'm going to tell you all about it," the man beside her went on kindly, tenderly.

She knew him to be Nathan of course. But what she didn't know, what she absolutely couldn't fathom was his uncanny transformation. Even as he proceeded to relate to her the story of it, she was unable to follow him very closely, battling as she was with her unruly emotions. Still pressing her lips with her handkerchief, she could only sit and marvel, stealing frequent glances at him and listening amazedly to the altered accents.

Slowly, in detail, Nathan described to her his life in San Francisco, careful only to avoid the part she had played in it, in way of inspiration and impulse. He would not buy her with any such medium of exchange.

She listened silently at first, but after a while, gaining gradual control of her voice, she asked an occasional question or two. Nathan answered them in detail, painstakingly. For a whole hour-and-a-half he tried to tear away for her the mystery of his metamorphosis.

When he believed at last that he had succeeded, he said brightly, "So you see what I meant when I told you that you were as free as if the poor sailor-boy you married out of pity were dead and buried. I've got rid of him for you. I guess I'd do for *you* as much



as I tried to do for my mother. I've got rid of that chap for you, Rebecca, drugged him, asphyxiated him, put him to sleep. He doesn't exist any more."

Reba murmured, "I didn't marry him out of pity."

"Well, all right. You have it *your* way. He isn't around any more to argue with you about it. It doesn't matter."

Reba glanced away. Her eyes followed a squirrel darting up the trunk of a tree. She had herself well under control now. She ought to, she should think. She had had time enough. It had just struck half-past four.

"I think I know what you mean," she said gravely. ("If the man I married doesn't exist for *me* any more, then *I* don't exist for *him*," she was thinking. "That's what he's trying to tell me as delicately as possible.")

She didn't say this outloud—not yet. And Nathan had no idea of the nature of her conclusions, as he reached for her shopping-bag, took it out of her lap (just the fact that it was hers made his hand tremble a little), opened it, and dropped into it a small white package, "The ring you gave the sailor-boy," he explained lightly, snapped the bag together, and laid it down beside her on the bench. "I figured it this way," he went on in the same forced cheerful tone. "I didn't want anything of claims on you, that belonged to some one who's dead."

Reba glanced down at the bag beside her. "Then of course you'd like your rings back, too," she said, in a little hard strained voice. "I've got only the wedding-ring here with me," she went on, drawing off her glove, "I'll have to send you the other one. I didn't wear



it after what you wrote it meant." She began struggling with the heavy gold band on the third finger of her left hand.

Nathan made a little negative motion. "I don't want it. I believe a married woman usually wears her husband's ring, doesn't she, even if he's dead, as long as she bears his name. I don't want the ring *he* gave you."

"Very well," she acquiesced. She *would* still require it. That was so. "But remember you're free—as free as you tell me I am. Oh, I understand. I see," she broke off. "You're changed, not only on the outside, but all through—all through—all through."

He glanced at her sharply, suspiciously. Did she, could she mean that his *love* for her had changed? And the touch of her very shopping-bag had made him tremble!

"I don't blame you for not caring any more," she went on. "In fact, I think it would be strange if you did. *I* haven't had any part in your making-over."

Her voice caught and broke a little. Nathan heard the catch and the break. He wanted, he *wanted* to grasp hold of her bare hand lying so dangerously near and crush it and crush it! He wanted to show her, then and there, whether he had changed or not! But he didn't. Instead he said quietly, but in a voice that failed utterly to be calm and steady, "Listen, Rebecca, listen, listen. We're strangers, you and I. Somebody just introduced us to each other a day or two ago. We've got only as far as first names. But I want very much to get further. Oh, I do want to know you better, I want you to know me better. But



I don't want to know you any faster than is proper for two people who've got only as far as we have. Don't you *see*? Don't you *understand*?"

It was Nathan's voice that caught and broke now. As he leaned toward her, Reba saw that his forehead was damp with perspiration. She could hear him breathing. His obvious emotion was like a little stab in a spot in her breast she thought was dead to feeling. She drew in her breath with a little audible sound of surprise.

Suddenly Nathan stood up. He took out his handkerchief and wiped his forehead (his eyes, surreptitiously, too), put the handkerchief away again; drew in his breath very deep; let it out. Then, first glancing at his wrist-watch, he said in a perfectly matter-of-fact tone, "Well, I suppose I better be getting back to my quarters pretty soon. An old tentmate of mine and I are sharing a room together at the Y.M.C.A. I've no engagement for this evening. Perhaps you haven't either. If you haven't, will you have dinner with me somewhere, and go to the theater afterward? Among other things Mrs. Barton taught me, was the proper time for young ladies to be dropped at their front doors."

Reba's eyes softened. Was ever a man so gallant as this? Her face lighted. She smiled.

"I'd like to go to the theater with you very much," she said; "if you're sure it's quite proper for us to go without a chaperon," she added with droll little upward glance at him. Her eyes were sparkling with tears, but they were sparkling with something else beneath, which Nathan had never seen in their brown depths before—humor. Fisherman's luck!



Looking straight into those eyes, Nathan said, "When I was a boy I never knew what speckled prizes were hidden away in the brown pools till I fished them."

Reba gave a nervous little laugh. "*Now* I know it's you," she exclaimed, "talking that funny way I don't understand—like a poet."

"It's *you* that makes me talk that way," said Nathan gravely.

It was eleven o'clock when he left Reba that night at the door of the hotel where she had taken a room. It was eleven the next night too. But before she went to sleep it was two and three by the big clock, made of electric lights, hanging in the sky like a huge moon outside Reba's window at the end of the open train-yard space, that stretched away to the west for an uninterrupted quarter-of-a-mile.

The big face of the clock stared not only into Reba's room, but into her soul too, it seemed to her. She was well acquainted with the clock and it was well acquainted with her— Too well, oh, too well acquainted! This very clock used always to be waiting up for her when, concealed inside the closed automobile on those now flaying Saturday nights of a year ago, she came stealing speedily by it, on her way back to her room at the Alliance.

Had only twelve—eleven months passed since then?

"Oh, am I so fickle?" she asked of the clock out-loud the second night after she had left Nathan downstairs. She had looked straight into his eyes for a long twenty seconds when they said good-night. She had done this to test herself. But she hadn't stood



the test. She was feeling still the grip of his fingers about her arm as he grasped it after she dropped her eyes and whispered good-night. She was exulting in it still! "Oh, am I made of such common clay?" she murmured.

There were only two nights with the big clock in Boston. On the third morning, Nathan had submitted to Rebecca the hope that had been trembling in his heart ever since her summons had arrived. There was a place, he said, (somebody at camp had told him about it) way up in New Hampshire, hidden in a crevice between two mountains, where a lot of the treasures he had been fond of as a boy were stored away, waiting for rediscovery—big hemlocks and virgin pines, tiny little maiden-hair ferns, and soft springy mosses, of a fragrance more beautiful to him than the camelias of China or the wisteria of Japan. He didn't know how Rebecca would feel about it—perhaps she didn't like mountain brooks and mountain trails—but he would like, just for once, to see how the shadowy woods of his boyhood recollection became her. He had always associated her, somehow, with things in the woods—brooks, flowers, fawns. His friend had told him there was a boarding-house in the little crevice. There were two, in fact.

"Perhaps I'd be calling at the one where you were stopping, and where I wasn't, and taking you out for walks once in a while, and showing you the things I used to think were pretty when I was a boy—if you were thinking, that is, of spending a few days up in that little place, just about now."

Reba replied smiling: "*I was* thinking of it."



Nathan showed no surprise. "I'll buy two fishing-rods then," he said casually.

"Oh, Nathan," tremulously Reba exclaimed. "Only *you* could have made out of it a beautiful adventure!"



## CHAPTER XXXVI

ONE Sunday in early October, about five o'clock in the afternoon, there was an automobile drawn up to the side door of the Jerome house. It was David's automobile. He had bought it second hand, two years ago. It was a small car but very clean and very shining—not a scratch anywhere. David himself was seated behind the wheel. He was waiting to take Reba's "young man" to the station. He had been waiting for nearly ten minutes now. Twice he had taken out his big gold watch and looked at it. Why didn't he come? David didn't like to hurry his car. Again he took out his watch and looked at it, then slowly, clumsily crawled out from behind the wheel and walked up the steps to the front door. He went in.

He found the women hovering around the foot of the front stairs, all of them, but Augusta, and he caught a glimpse of her, too, in a moment. She was standing in the dining-room staring out of the window. David cleared his throat, and twitched his head toward the upper story.

"Why don't they come?" he asked.

"Why don't you go up and ask them?" snapped Eunice.

"Well, he'll miss his train," David grunted. He sat down on the edge of the hat-tree box, and looked at his watch again.

Suddenly a door was heard opening above and



closing again gently. It was Reba's door that had opened and closed like that. A second later a firm step crossed the hall, and the nervous group at the foot of the stairs, staring up, saw first Nathan's army-shod feet, and in a flash his whole uniformed figure coming quickly down the stairs. He was alone. Reba, then, had remained in her room. That was well, thought David. The young man had only to pick up his army overcoat, there on a chair (his suitcase was already stowed away in the back of the automobile), and they could be off.

David would be glad of that. All the fuss and feathers women-folks do make over a uniform! Even gray-haired women, like Augusta and Emma and Syringa! Had the curtains up in the best parlor ever since Reba had brought home her young husband a week ago! Been using the best china too! And such extravagant cooking! It was unpatriotic in the face of Hoover's instructions. Big juicy rump steaks for supper! There had been a whole week of it, quite enough for David, when orders had come, two days ago, for this Nathan (David found it difficult to use his son-in-law's Christian name) to report at Hoboken. It meant France, of course. Reba had turned suddenly into a dumb, stone sort of creature at the orders. Even David noticed it. Seemed queer to him she should take it so hard—her husband going to France, when she had been so cheerful all those years when he was wandering around among the dangerous, cannibal-inhabited islands, where they send missionaries.

'Twasn't the only thing that seemed queer to David about Reba's marriage either. She had gone forth to



meet this Nathan of hers, a calm, composed, sensible young woman. She had come back with him, anything but that! David couldn't make her out—she seemed so sort of “jumpy,” coloring up, eyes getting full of tears, and land knows what, right at the table, before people, if the young fellow as much as spoke to her. She had acquired, too, in her six weeks' absence with him, outlandish notions about following him around to training-camps, inconsistent with her former serene attitude toward him when he was at sea. The first letter she wrote home after she went to meet him in Boston, mailed some ten days or two weeks after her departure, bore the postmark of the town near the camp where he was in training. She was hanging around in a lodging-house, doing absolutely nothing, it appeared, but picking up odd scraps of half-days, or half-hours, or half-minutes, as the case might be, with this Nathan fellow of hers. It seemed to David that she acted kind of “cracked” about him, writing out in plain English how fine she thought he was, and repeating the flattering remarks of his superior officers. Unbecoming of a young woman married as long as she had been, David thought. She went so far as to say in the letter she wrote home, announcing that she and this man were to pay a visit to 89 Chestnut Street (he was to be transferred to another camp, she said, and a week's leave had been granted), she went so far as to say in that letter that if every captain in the United States Army was as adored by his men (yes, used the word “adored”) as Nathan was, they would be ready to follow him blindfolded into the very jaws of death, as she herself was ready to follow him blindfolded to the ends



of the earth. That was the way she wrote. Why, it was embarrassing. Such things ought not be said on paper, if, in fact, they ought to be said at all. There used to be such a thing as reserve in women, but David guessed it had gone out of style.

The fellow himself seemed sensible enough. David had dreaded his arrival horribly; supposed he would turn out to be the usual whippersnapper type of young man, the kind Mr. Horween was always digging up from the city and putting in charge of various departments at the factory—glib, smart-talking young fellows—gas-bags, David called them. But Reba's young man hadn't proved to be a gas-bag. Seemed, on the other hand, a modest, quiet-spoken young fellow. David's chief objection to him was his uniform. "Don't see why he has to dress up in all his fine feathers 'round here for," he had complained secretly to Syringa.

As Nathan came down the stairs now, David called up to him briefly, "Hurry up. We haven't got any more than time to make it," and then went out to start his engine.

Nathan had been a member of the Jerome household only a little over a week. But he had walked straight into the hearts of every woman in it. Nathan, with his instinctive tenderness toward all women, had a way of walking into their hearts. He had been as gentle, as chivalrous in speech and manner, to the various women in this austere New England family as to the warm-hearted little Mrs. Barton. Now, swinging his overcoat over his arm first, he turned to say good-by to the members of Rebecca's family, one by one, giving them each some little special word or



caress, that made their cold blood run a little warmer.

Augusta was still standing at the dining-room window when Nathan came down the stairs, her back uncompromisingly toward the hall. It was all so like another good-by (only *his* uniform had been blue) that she could not trust herself to turn around. But Nathan approached her undaunted.

"Good-by, Rebecca's Aunt Augusta," he murmured, and put his hand upon her shoulder.

She drew in her breath suddenly at that. It made an unexpected noise in her throat. The hand on her shoulder patted her gently, twice. Think of it! An old woman like her! Augusta's hands went up to her mouth quick in an attempt to hide her jerking jaw. She might have broken down before them all if it hadn't been for the interruption.

"Nathan! Nathan!" a voice suddenly called from the hall.

It was Rebecca. She was standing half-way down the stairs. She had stolen out of her room, after Nathan had left her, to get one more glimpse of him if possible. And it had flashed across her suddenly, as she leaned there at the top of the stairs, that one more clasp of his arms about her was possible, if she acted quickly. Besides—besides, *she* ought to be the last one in this house whom he touched before he went away! They had decided to say good-by to each other upstairs behind closed doors. But she didn't care who saw her. Oh, she didn't care! A hundred people could look on for all she cared *now*!

Nathan ran up the stairs to her. "Rebecca!" he exclaimed softly.

"Say good-by to me again!" Reba whispered.



He flung down his coat, gathered her into his arms, held her close a second.

"It's quarter past five," David's gruff voice called from the front door.

Nathan very tenderly unclasped Rebecca's hands, pushed her away from him, whispered "Good-by, good-by," picked up his coat, ran down the stairs. Reba saw the door close behind him, heard it slam. He was gone. Gone!

The parlor! One more glimpse of him still was possible from the parlor. Down the stairs she sped, across the hall. Helping hands pulled open the heavy sliding-doors for her. She ran to the window, pushed back the laces.

There he was! Seated in the car beside her father going down the hill. And he was waving—just on the chance she might be watching. The very last bit Rebecca saw of Nathan as he sank out of sight over the hill was his steadily waving arm.

"Come, Reba," Aunt Augusta said to her a half-hour later, when she found her there in the parlor, still staring out of the window. "You mustn't stay in here alone."

"No, I suppose not," she replied dully.

Augusta Morgan put her hand shyly on Reba's arm. "*I understand. I know,*" she murmured. Then, "Come, child," she said. "Don't stay here alone. Come out into the kitchen and help us put away the best china."

"Don't put it away yet!" Reba exclaimed. "*Please don't put away the things we had out for him—yet.*"

"All right. We won't then. We won't put it away at all, if you'd kind of like to use it, Reba."



"And," Aunt Augusta directed Syringa, "don't you go to pulling down the parlor-shades to-morrow either, like a fool. If Reba wants things the way they were for *him*, then let her have 'em that way. 'Tisn't much comfort, but it may be a little, and if she cares for him the way we saw she did there on the stairs—well, I guess she needs all the kindness we can give her."

To David she said, "Don't you say a single cross word to Reba, David Jerome, if you have to bite your tongue out stopping yourself. You hear?"

"Who wants to say a cross word to her," David retorted. "You better mind your own business, Augusta."

One day Reba, coming home as usual at noon, after her morning in the town-hall, saw something unfamiliar hanging in the parlor window. It was a small red flag with a single blue star on a white field in the center of it. It was hanging in the very window where she had watched Nathan waving to her as he went down the hill, three weeks ago. Reba had never seen a service-flag before. In October, 1917, there were not many of them to be seen.

"I got it down in Union," Aunt Augusta explained to Reba in the hall. "Down there you'll see a flag like that hanging up in the front windows of lots of the houses. Sometimes there's more than one star, though, for each star stands for a boy who's gone to the war. I thought we ought to hang up a star in our front window for the one who has gone to war from here."

Reba's eyes suddenly filled with tears. A blue star



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hung up in the front windows of 89 Chestnut Street for Nathan! A blue star hung up by Aunt Augusta for the man whom Reba loved! She reached for the older woman's hand and pressed it hard.

"And all you in there," she murmured, nodding toward her mother's room, "knitting for him besides, sewing for him, planning little surprises for him, to put in the box we're going to send. Oh, Aunt Augusta, it's like a miracle!"

Coming home that night she saw a light shining in the parlor windows of 89 Chestnut Street, softly illuminating the red, white and blue of Nathan's flag.

"It wouldn't show evenings unless we *did* keep a light burning at night," Aunt Augusta briefly explained at the supper table when David had grumbled at the innovation, "so stop your fussing about it. It won't do a mite of good. One extra gas-jet burning evenings for as long as the war lasts, isn't going to put you into the poor-house, I guess, David Jerome."

After supper, Reba stole into the parlor all alone. From the parlor window, just as from her own upstairs, she could see the lights of lower-Ridgefield—the souls of the little houses, she used to make believe—softly shining in the valley. She could see, too, the stars in the sky, softly shining, out there beyond the star in the window. The souls of the little worlds below, and of the big worlds above, were gathered together as usual on this clear October evening in silent assembly. Only to-night there was a new star, there was a new soul, pricking the dark!

Later Reba wrote to her soldier: "I never glance up, night or day, as I turn in the driveway of 89 Chestnut Street, but that I see your star shining out at



me from the window in the parlor, where the curtains used to be drawn down tight. The blind old house has had its closed eyes opened, Nathan, and has been given sight."

THE END



















